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PERSHING

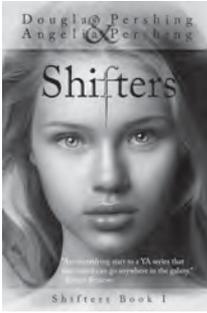
**INSPIRATION**





**INSPIRATION**

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# INSPIRATION

by Douglas Pershing



Edited by John Shaddox

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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*For my mother, Mavis Lydia Nyssen, the first person to hear me read this manuscript. The words, "Oh, my," with each plot twist still ring in my ears. I'll miss you, mom. Rest in peace.*

*For my wife, Tamy for encouraging me to keep writing. For my son Cory, who's always there with ideas when I get stuck, and my daughter, Angelia, the one who introduced me to the world of young adult books.*

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“But you said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God, And I will sit on the mount of assembly in the recesses of the north. I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.’”

Isaiah 14:13-14



I *First Breath*

HE WOKE TO A BURNING PAIN THEN ARCHED HIS BACK, searching for relief as he opened his eyes to survey the surroundings. Everything looked wrong, blurry and indistinct. A sharp pain erupted across, what must be his face, but it didn't feel right either.

With a tug he emerged from the water. The cool night air hit him like a celestial steel blade across his skin. Screams rained down from above, but that's not what he focused on. Something, someone had dragged him to the shore. There was a voice. A girl harshly whispered words he couldn't make out.

Another blow struck his cheek. "You have to breathe, you idiot!" she said as she hit him again.

His chest burned. The words made no sense. Arching his back, he opened his mouth wide, and tore at his chest. The burning was so great. He had to think.

*I have to breathe. I know this! They told me!*

He could make out a figure in the dark directly above him. There wasn't much light, but he could see it was female—a terribly ugly creature, but definitely female. He watched the water drop from her hands as she raised them high above her head.

"I swear," she said as she slammed her clenched fists into his chest.

The shock of the blast caused him to exhale violently, sucking in a deep, cold breath, bringing immediate relief. He exhaled and drew another.

*This was it! He was breathing! His first breaths from his first life.*

"I'm breathing!" he screamed to the hideous creature.

"No shit, Sherlock!" She rolled her eyes. "Now come on or they'll see us."

"Who?"

She pointed up the sheer cliff to a gathering of forms that screamed and cried. "They have to think you're dead," she said, pulling him deeper into the shadows.

He didn't know why, but he knew he had to follow her. She dragged him along the dark cliff base. He followed the best he could on quivering legs, but he couldn't stop shaking. Every part of him was cold like he'd never felt before. He paused and wondered at the mist emitting from his mouth. He'd never seen anything like it and never felt the sting of cold air in his lungs. He always had lungs, just not the need to breathe. It was all too amazing.

"Tiamanicus! We have to go!" She swung around and clamped hard on his hand. "I swear! If Thamuz sends me for a birth again..."

His name. Finally, something he recognized. His name was Tiamanicus.

\* \* \*

He shivered in the passenger seat of the Escalade, staring at the passing lights. Everything looked so different

through these eyes. The colors were alive. The sounds were clear. Even the smells were different. He could feel a heart beating in his chest. The strangest, by far, was the absence of the Whisperers surrounding people as they walked the city streets—blissfully unaware of the true world in which they lived.

“Here. This should help.” The girl twisted a knob, and a blast of hot air hit him in the face. She chuckled and told him, “Just deal with it. It’ll warm you.”

He stared back at her. Her skin was hideously smooth and devoid of callus. Her hair was long, dark, and thick. He couldn’t see her skull. Worst of all, her eyes were full of color.

She looked human.

“Please tell me I don’t look as bad as you,” he said through chattering teeth.

She threw her head back and laughed deeply. “Trust me. You got it way worse.” She reached over and pulled the visor down, revealing a small vanity mirror. “You’re a guy!”

For the first time since Creation, he gazed upon his own face. He’d been told he was beautiful. He’d been told he was glorious. He’d been told of his great cracked and battle-scarred features. Tiamanicus, the Whisperer. The great deceiver.

In his realm, one could never look upon his own likeness. They were reliant on one another to tell of their greatness. The greatest of them bore the thickest calluses and battle scars. Fresh wounds and seeping cracks in their thick flesh was a treasured physical trait. A sign of a recent victory.

The reflection staring back at him was not as he’d been described. His eyes were deep brown. His hair was thick and matched his new eyes. Worst of all, his skin was smooth and young over sharp, terribly human features.

He went to slap the mirror away, but stalled when he caught sight of his hand. He held it up and raised the other

one before his eyes. He'd never seen his hands before. There was a glint of color on the right as he turned it.

"Well, look at that." The girl smirked. "It seems your body had a girlfriend. Isn't that the sweetest thing?"

"Why do you say that?" he asked, still turning his hand.

"A promise ring. I'd say that promise has been broken." She smiled and looked at the road. "You might want to get rid of that. Things from the body's past are never good."

He slapped the mirror shut—disgusted with his reflection—and took the ring off. The girl reached toward her door and pressed a button. He jumped as the window next to him lowered, letting a stream of cool night air whip through his wet hair. She motioned for him to throw it out. Making a show of the action, he held the ring up and whipped his hand out. She smiled, and he brought his hand back in.

Shivering at the cold, he shoved his hands in his pockets, being careful not to let her see the ring he still held. He wasn't sure why, but he didn't want to let it go. Something about its name was curious to him. A promise ring.

It reminded him of his great lord's promise of victory on the Last Day. The promise of casting the Selfish One out of heaven and claiming what was rightfully theirs. The promise that one day they would not be bound to this wretched world. The promise of eternal glory and the removal of salvation from the pitiful inhabitants of this fragile planet.



## *2 The Commission*

THE DRIVE SEEMED TO LAST FOREVER. WHEN THE CAR finally stopped, Tiamanicus didn't care where they were. He was so exhausted nothing mattered. He'd felt worn down after a battle, but it was nothing like this. This body was sluggish and slow. The girl shoved him through a door and down a hall before finally pushing him down on a soft surface.

"You need to sleep," she told him as she pulled his clothes off and dropped them on the floor. "At least you're mostly dry now."

"Have you done this before?" Tiamanicus asked.

"Depends what you mean. If you mean an embodiment, then obviously, yes. We all have. You, however, are my first birth."

She pulled the blankets over his naked body, pausing slightly to take in the sight of his seventeen-year-old form. As she covered him, she thought of her own birth just six months ago. At first, she was repulsed by the sight of the human body. After a few short days in her new form, she

discovered the longing for physical contact. She disgusted herself.

“What’s your name?” His eyes fluttered and lightly settled closed.

She pulled the pillow under his head and said, “My name is Rimmon. You’re in the house of Thamuz.” Seeing he was already asleep, she smiled and quietly added, “I don’t suppose you got any of that.” She sat on the bed looking at him then tucked the thin blanket over his shoulders.

Rimmon knew she should have left, but he looked so perfect. Her hand paused on his muscular shoulder. Her breath quickened as she ran her fingers over his relaxed muscle. She checked the door to make sure she was alone before running her hand down the contours of his side and paused on his hip. With another quick glance, she spread her fingers over his firm ass and gently squeezed. She felt her heart quicken as she traced his thighs, marveling at the way the tendons, bone, and muscle were so meticulously constructed. His body was a true work of art.

“What are you doing, Rimmon?” she whispered as she withdrew her hand. She quietly sat on the bed, watching his mouth sag open.

“So... how did it feel?” a soft voice asked.

She drew a quick breath and swung her head around to see William leaning on the doorway. She was busted! How much did he see? She knew physical relations were strictly prohibited. Dangerous.

“What do you mean?” She stood and gave the house leader an innocent smile. Motioning toward the hall, they stepped out, and she gently tugged the door until hearing the quiet click of the latch. Taking a deep breath she faced William.

“The collection. What else?” William shook his head. “This was your first time. It’s traumatic transitioning from Whisperer to Talker. Not just for the soul. The first time

you're assigned for birth can bring back memories." He gave her a concerned fatherly look and asked, "How did it feel? Are you okay?"

"Oh. Yeah." Her shoulders relaxed. "It's not what I expected. I mean, he didn't know how to breathe or anything. I remembered mine. It was scary. Is that normal?"

William nodded and put his arm around her. "I birthed you. Remember?" He turned toward her and put his hand out, wiggling his fingers.

"Oh. Right." She sighed as she dropped the keys in his hand.

He clutched them and said, "This doesn't mean—"

"I know. No driving yet. I'm not responsible enough."

He smiled. "Seriously though. Thanks for helping tonight. Come on. Let him sleep."

\* \* \*

Tiamanicus was back in his familiar surroundings. The colors were gone, and the forms were gloriously rough, and scarred. He stood before the great Zagan, the demon king charged with command over many legions, one of which were the embodied spirits known as Talkers.

Tiamanicus scanned the eyes of Zagan's advisors who whispered among themselves while keeping a safe distance. One stared at him. Tiamanicus knew that stare. He reveled in it. That one was jealous. Why wouldn't he be?

Tiamanicus had always wanted the chance to walk among humans. Being a Whisperer was satisfying, and he was good at it. Humans called his whispers inspiration. He'd learned over centuries that constructing lies based on truth was most effective. It was simple. All humans wanted was to feel good about themselves. They're attractive. They deserve good things. God wants to fulfill their every desire.

As a Talker, he could take his gift of deception directly to the people the Selfish One so dearly treasured. They wouldn't

only hear him in their thoughts, as if they were smart enough to have thoughts of their own.

“I don’t understand,” he said in his native celestial tongue. “You told me I was to be a Talker.”

“You are, Tiamanicus,” Zagan hissed in the same language. “When embodied, we can’t have direct contact. Your body is sleeping; thus, we can communicate.”

“I remember. It’s... disorienting. The body is strange.”

“Yes,” Zagan replied. “Made in His image. He was too generous with them. Our lord has promised us a greater form upon the Selfish One’s final defeat on the Last Day.”

He’d been told of the Last Day since he first chose to follow the greatest angel, Lucifer, along with legions of his comrades.

Separation from the Selfish One was an amazing feeling. Lord Lucifer gave him a freedom and release from the Selfish One. Until then, he hadn’t realized how much glory the Selfish One had kept from him.

“It’s time to reveal your commission,” Zagan told him. “Lucifer himself has commanded it.”

Tiamanicus marveled at the thought that the Great One would be following his commission. The thought of his name on Lucifer’s lips gave him a great feeling of pride. He finally had the chance to prove his worth to the Lord of all the Earth.

“The Great One?” Tiamanicus asked. “He knows of me?”

Zagan smiled slyly and hissed, “Thamuz recommended you personally. Your body lies in his house as we speak. You shall be in his charge. We expect this to be the first of many great commissions for you.”

“Thamuz mentioned me in an audience with the Great One?” Tiamanicus marveled. He’d performed many deeds under the direction of Thamuz since Earth had been given to Lucifer to rule. Tiamanicus had always dreamed of the day his great work would be recognized.

Zagan and Tiamanicus appeared above a group of young humans sitting in rows. Tiamanicus recognized it as a classroom with an instructor lecturing from the front of the room. Each of the room's occupants had various demons—mostly lower forms of Whisperers—circling them. The instructor had two fluttering around him as he talked of evolutionary theory. An incredible inspiration. A truth with just enough embellishment to remove the Creator.

One girl stood out from the group. Two glowing beings surrounded her. From those, the Whisperers cowered. Tiamanicus angered at the sight.

“Why are they not engaging the enemy?” Tiamanicus asked his new commander.

“It seems the Holy One favors this one. The bright ones are archangels. They have vanquished all who have come to battle.”

Tiamanicus became even more angry. “Why would the Holy One care for this one human? What interest does Lucifer have with her?”

“Do not speak his name so lightly. It is not your place to question our lord,” Zagan hissed.

Tiamanicus realized his disrespect and shrank. “Of course, my lord. What is it you command of me?”

“It's a simple task. You shall use your gift to change her path.”

“Yes, my lord. If the angels have vanquished all those who have come to battle, how shall I defeat them?”

Zagan looked in his eyes. Tiamanicus marveled at the power that bore into him. They were dim and yellow with small, dark vertical slits directed at him.

“As an embodied Talker, you partake in the privileges the Creator bestowed upon human kind,” Zagan told him. “The bright ones will have no power over you; however, you will be on your own. Our legions will not be able to assist you. Thamuz tells us that won't be a problem. Do you agree?”

“Yes, my lord.” Tiamanicus bowed before the great demon. “You will not be disappointed.”



3 *About a Girl*

TIAMANICUS COVERED HIS FACE AS THE LIGHT ASSAULTED his new eyes. Why was everything so bright in the physical realm? He sat up, threw the covers off, and took the normal hunched stance of his true form, but it felt wrong. This body was wrong. He straightened and stood tall for the first time in a millennium.

He heard voices from down the hall, so he began working his way toward them. His body shook as he stumbled through the corridor. His skin pricked as the cool air brushed against him. He felt a deep pain in his stomach and began wondering if being human meant constant discomfort.

The voices led him to the brightest room of the house. With one hand massaging his aching midsection and the other attempting to block the blinding light, he entered. Conversation stopped.

All eyes were on him. They looked human, but through his new eyes, there was a difference. They were still horrible and fragile, but with the colors of this world, they looked

different than they had during his centuries of observation from his realm. They had always looked the same.

In the light they were actually quite distinct beings. He recognized the girl who brought him to the house, but there were others. A girl wearing some strange half-human, half-fish drawing on an oversized shirt sat giggling at the table and said, "Uncle Will, he's naked."

"That's enough, Claire. Let's welcome our new guest," a middle aged man chided the blonde girl, who looked around six or seven. Tiamanicus had difficulty judging human age.

Tiamanicus looked to the one familiar face in the room and said, "I believe something's wrong with this body."

With a smirk, she looked down his form and said, "Everything looks in the right place to me."

The man said, "Ben, get him something to wear."

At that, a teenage boy got up and ran out of the room. He came back a few seconds later and helped Tiamanicus put on a t-shirt and sweatpants.

"Does it always feel like this?" Tiamanicus asked.

"You're such an idiot," the familiar girl said. "How long have you been a Whisperer anyway?"

"Bethany," the man said. "It wasn't so long ago—"

"Whatever," Bethany said, rolling her eyes. "Haven't you ever watched them eat?"

Tiamanicus wrinkled his brow.

"You're hungry, Einstein."

"That's enough, Bethany!" the man scolded her. He reached and took the newcomer's hand. "Come sit, Zachary."

"My name is Tiamanicus, the Deceiver," he told the man.

"He's silly, Uncle Will," the little girl told the man. "Why does Zack talk so funny?"

"Here we go by our human names," the man told him, urging him to sit at the table. "From now on, you are Zachary."

My name is William.” He pointed around the room and said, “This is Ben, Bethany, and Claire.”

They all nodded as they were introduced.

Claire leaned over to Bethany and whispered loudly, “I saw Zack’s thingy.” She scrunched her face and added, “It’s ugly.”

Bethany leaned over and held her palm up to her mouth and whispered to Claire, “Let me tell you a secret.” She whispered extra loud, “They’re all ugly.”

Claire giggled. “You’re funny, Beth.”

“And you’re adorable. Now, let’s get you to school,” Bethany said, urging the young girl to go with her.

“Awe,” Claire moaned. “I want to meet my new cousin.”

“You’ll have plenty of time to see him later. Come on now,” Bethany said as they both left the room.

Tiamanicus—now Zachary—stood with his mouth open. William sat him down and placed a full breakfast in front of him. He breathed in all of the new warm and sweet smells. He’d never eaten before. The taste was amazing. There were eggs, toast, hash browns, and pancakes covered in butter and syrup.

The pain in his stomach subsided, and for the first time, he envied the humans. The feeling of eating was wondrous. How had this been withheld from him for all these centuries? At that, he hated the humans even more. Were there more pleasures the Selfish One had kept from him?

“It’s good, isn’t it?” Ben asked with a smile.

“What?” Zachary asked.

“Eating.”

Zachary nodded.

\* \* \*

Zachary sat in the office with William. The room was adorned with wood accents. Old books filled the shelves, giving the room a dark, rich look. William sat in a large

chair behind an opulent desk as Zachary chose an oversized wingback chair.

“Did you meet with Zagan?” William asked.

Zachary nodded then told him about the commission and the archangels surrounding the girl. William listened intently and explained the choice to use Tiamanicus—now known as Zachary—as a first-time Talker was his alone.

“Her name is Emma Louise Green. She’s seventeen years old,” William told Zachary. “As you described, she’s heavily protected. This leads us to believe she has an important purpose. We’ve lost numerous warriors in traditional spiritual warfare. There’s great risk bringing the war to this realm.”

“What risk?” Zachary asked.

“You don’t need to worry about that,” William said. “You won’t fail.”

Zachary felt a sense of pride at the confidence. Not only did William—Thamuz in the spiritual realm—know he would succeed, but his name—Tiamanicus—was known by Zagan and the Great One, Lucifer himself. He knew soon he would be a legion commander or better. His mind swam with the possibilities.

“What do you want of me?” Zachary asked.

“Get to know her,” William told him. “Find out what she cares about. Find her purpose. Then use that to break her. Lead her away from those who protect her. Make them look away. The longer the better.” William knew this was more difficult than he was making it sound. With the recent losses, he was not far from losing his own command. Bringing Tiamanicus in as a Talker was more of a risk than he was letting on.

“Okay,” Zachary said. “That doesn’t sound too hard. What’s the catch?”

“No catch.”



4 *Meeting Green*

“I TOLD YOU THIS IS THE ONLY WAY,” THAMUZ ARGUED WITH Zagan in the dark realm.

“The risk is too great,” Zagan hissed. He tried to hide his envy at the charge Thamuz was given in the human realm. “They have no protection.”

“He can find it. I’m sure of it,” Thamuz spit.

“The last one with this much protection nearly cost me my legions,” Zagan said.

“But you won.”

“Yes, but at what cost? Nearly a thousand vanquished. Assure me you can have her turn away from her protection willingly.”

Thamuz knew if Zagan failed he would be stripped of his position. That would leave great opportunity for advancement. Zagan would be abandoned by Lucifer himself. Although the Great One could not vanquish one of his own, he surely would place a demon unprotected before the Holy One’s forces. Thamuz had witnessed it before. The

loss of a high ranking officer caused great celebration among the armies of Lucifer.

Thamuz bowed. "Oh, great Zagan, you have my assurance. Tiamanicus will succeed."

\* \* \*

"Go wake Zachary," William told Ben. "This is a big day."

Ben took his last bite and wiped his chin. Since he was the last new Talker in the house, he was excited to finally be the expert. He ran down the hall to Zachary's room and skidded to a stop when he saw Bethany sneaking out of Zachary's bedroom door. She held her finger to her mouth, and Ben gave her a stern look.

"What're you doing? If William found out..." Ben whispered.

"What?" She shrugged her shoulders. "I didn't do anything. He's still asleep. I was just looking in on him."

"That's not right, Beth. You know the rules."

"What rules? You know we have no protection here, right?"

"So! That's why we have to be extra careful."

"That's not the way I see it."

"Are you crazy?"

"Maybe," she said as she walked to her room.

Ben glared at her before entering Zachary's room. He whipped the blinds up, and a stream of light hit Zachary's face, causing him to throw his arm over his eyes and moan.

"You have to get up," Ben said. "William said today's your first day of school."

"The strangest thing happened when I was sleeping," Zachary said. "It wasn't a realm visit. It was more like I was somewhere else."

"That's a dream."

"A dream?"

"Yeah, didn't they tell you about dreams?" Ben asked.

“Turns out, they didn’t tell me much at all.”

“William always tells us, ‘Once you become a Talker, you basically become human.’ When you embody a human, you get everything that goes along with it. The good and the bad. Like eating and going to the bathroom.”

“Yeah,” Zachary said. “That was a lovely surprise. You could’ve warned me.”

Ben smiled. “What can I say? You eat; you poop. Tell me about your dream?”

“I was trapped in this net or tarp, and all of these hands were touching me all over my body. I couldn’t open my eyes to see who it was. Then you woke me up with the light.”

Ben muttered Bethany’s earlier comments to himself, “I didn’t do anything. I was just looking in on him.”

“Do you think it means something?” Zachary asked.

Ben looked at him. “They usually don’t mean anything, but maybe you should lock your door from now on.”

\* \* \*

William’s Escalade stopped in front of an old, two story building with the name “Inspiration High School” in large block letters over the double doors. William had everything prearranged. He had a schedule, books, even an escort. Bethany was the same age as Zachary, and she already knew her way around. She met him between each class and escorted him to the next room. She was very attentive and introduced him to her friends. He didn’t remember their names. He didn’t really pay any attention. It’s not like these people mattered.

Zachary could tell this place was in an unseen war. He couldn’t see the spirits, but he immediately recognized their strongholds. Girls gossiping in the hallways. A group of kids smoking behind the building. A couple making out, the girl eyeing him over the guy’s shoulder. For the enemy, a small group huddled in a room, holding hands in prayer. He may

just have to join that group. A little truth with a slight twist could do the trick.

One of his teachers eyed his body far too long. He could almost hear the Whisperer in her ear. "He's almost old enough. You know he wants it. You look damn good for thirty. All boys fantasize about their teacher. No one will ever know." He returned the stare, giving her a slight smile.

She would never know how much he despised her. How could the Creator love these vile creatures? They were so easy to read. As a Whisperer, he knew how easy it was to make them turn their back on their protection. The angels, their so called protectors, were too weak to look upon anything unclean. Although Whisperers couldn't read human thoughts as the enemy could, the response of the angels was enough to know they'd succeeded.

An angel turning away betrayed them. That's all he had to do with Emma Louise Green. Get the angels to leave her, or at least turn away long enough for a warrior to take hold. Once they have hold of her, the battle can begin. She had no idea the war she was about to start.

Zachary walked into science class and handed the teacher his admission slip. He eyed the name, "Mr. White," scrawled on the chalkboard above a desk.

"Ah. Mr. Sable," Mr. White said. "I see you're new to Inspiration. I trust our lovely town has been treating you well. Your transfer grades are most impressive. I've assigned you a seat next to Miss Green over there." He motioned toward Emma, who had taken notice as Mr. White acknowledged Zachary's grades. She quickly dropped her eyes to her books.

This was the first he'd seen her through his new eyes. She wasn't awful looking for a human. She had long dark brown hair and terribly smooth skin.

As Zachary walked toward her, he caught the scent of the girl. Human smells were new to him, unfamiliar and uncomfortable. He would have to get used to it if he was

going to get close to her. The girl squirmed in her seat. He forced his gaze to remain on Mr. White while catching Emma's eyes brushing over him.

"Nice work," Zachary muttered with a slight grin as he took his seat. He knew the Whisperers assigned to Mr. White had "inspired" him to seat the new kid next to his target.

"Did you say something, Zachary? Or do you prefer Zack?" the teacher asked.

"Zack's fine. The evolutionary chart you have on the board is very good," he told the teacher.

Mr. White smiled then returned to the lesson. Zachary leaned over to Emma and said, "He really does know his evolution, doesn't he?"

"Whatever," she told him. "I just need to know enough to pass the test. It's all bologna anyway."

"It's a widely accepted theory," he told her. "You have to admit that." When she looked straight at him, he was drawn to her eyes. They were large, maybe too large, giving her a childlike, helpless look. Since entering his new body, he marveled at how different humans looked from one another. He was struck by how many colors danced in Emma Green's rich brown eyes.

"I'll admit it's a widely accepted bunch of bologna," she retorted. "Now stop talking to me."

"Ouch," he said, feigning a punch in the shoulder.

Emma Green remained silent for the remainder of the class. When the bell rang, she was already on her feet, leaving the classroom.

"Okay, then," Zachary said to himself. "She seems great."



5 *Whisperer*

ZACHARY GOT UP TO FOLLOW HER, BUT MR. WHITE STOPPED him at the door. The teacher tried to ask him about what he studied and where exactly his old school was. Zachary had no idea, but he couldn't tell that to the man blocking his passage.

"Listen," Zachary told the teacher. "My uncle is picking me up and—"

"Yes, I know of your uncle. William Sable, isn't it?" Mr. White asked. "I would like to meet with him. I hear he's an interesting man."

Zachary saw an opening and attempted to duck out only to be blocked by the nimble teacher. What is up with humans? The girl he needs to talk to won't, and this guy won't stop. He lost sight of his target when she turned at the end of the long corridor.

"Sure," Zachary said quickly. "Meet with him. That'll be fine." He saw a familiar face in the hallway. Finally! "Bethany!" he yelled.

Bethany spotted him, gave the teacher a smile, and said, "There you are. Come on. Dad'll be waiting." She grabbed Zachary's hand and started to pull him past the teacher.

Mr. White's face became old and cracked with dim yellow eyes as it spat, "Tell us what we want!"

Zachary jumped. This is the face of a battle-hardened Whisperer ordering him to talk. He looked at Bethany to see her reaction. No reaction. Either this was normal, or he was the only one to see it.

Bethany hauled him away. He turned back to see an ordinary face watching him leave.

"So I'll set something up then?" the teacher called out and nodded.

He turned around and followed Bethany before asking, "Did you see that?"

"A nosy, lowlife teacher," she said, trying to weave through the crowded hallway.

"No," he said as he tried to navigate the oncoming traffic. "The Whisperer."

She stopped mid-step and fumbled her hands. Something hit the floor.

"Dammit!" she said. As she reached down, her backpack tipped and emptied its contents. Bethany dropped to her knees, letting more curses fly as she started putting books and papers back in her overstuffed accessory.

An old lady called out, "Language, Miss Sable."

Bethany pouted at the woman. "Sorry."

The woman gave her a look and walked quickly to a group gathering around some kind of commotion and yelled for them to stop.

There was a crunch then a quick apology from a student trying to get to the scene. Zachary looked to see Bethany reach under some papers for a small device. She picked it up then sat in the middle of the busy hallway. Her eyes welled up. What was that about?

“I finally got William to buy me the new one,” she said as annoyed students tried to avoid the obstacle course she’d created. “Look at it. The screen’s totally broken. He’s gonna be pissed.”

Zachary scooped up all of her things, stuffed them in the backpack, and told her to get up. She whined some more before accepting his help. Then, Bethany led him outside toward the parking lot. They walked to William’s black Escalade and got in.

William navigated out of the parking lot and onto a busy street. Bethany was sitting in the back seat, running her fingers over the cracked glass of her iPhone. She knew she shouldn’t get so worked up about a stupid phone, but having nice things made her feel better considering the rest of her life was so restricted. She was the only girl in the entire school who wasn’t allowed to have a boyfriend. Not openly, anyway. She knew the rules. She wouldn’t have sex, so she didn’t see what the big deal was.

When they pulled into the middle school parking lot, Ben ran up to the car and bounced into the seat. “So how was your first day?” he asked, leaning over the center console. “Did you meet Emma Green?”

Zachary looked over at William suspiciously and said, “I did.”

William looked at Zachary. “We share everything. Right now, your commission belongs to all of us.”

Zachary turned back to Ben and said, “She’s stuck up and thinks she knows everything. She wouldn’t even talk to me. Why don’t you worry about your own commission?”

“Theirs hasn’t been assigned yet,” William told him.

“Yeah,” Ben said. “You got yours right away. That’s not normal, but you’re famous.”

Zachary smiled. He knew he was well-known. He never had a command, but he was good. And now he knew Zagan and Lucifer spoke of him. This was going extremely well.

“Why are you being so quiet back there?” William asked as he looked at Bethany’s reflection in the rear-view. “Don’t you have anything to report?”

“It wasn’t my fault,” Bethany said, knowing she was about to get in trouble. “Ask Zack. I didn’t even do it. It was an accident. Some stupid kid stepped on it.”

“Don’t tell me, Beth,” William started to scold her. She held the cracked phone up so he could see. “You had that for *three* days, Beth. If you can’t take care of things, you won’t get ‘em anymore.”

The black Escalade pulled into the driveway of the large house. Bethany told William he didn’t understand what it was like to be a girl in high school and how she had to do everything they did so she could fit in and not look like a freak.

“You have to get me a new one,” Bethany demanded. “It was his fault anyway,” she said pointing to Zachary. “He surprised me when he told me about the Whisperer.” She got out of the car, slammed the door, and stormed into the house.

Ben’s eyes grew large, and he said, “You saw a Whisperer?” When Zachary nodded, Ben told him, “That’s impossible. We can’t see the spirit world with these eyes.”

“Are you sure you saw one?” William asked.

“Yeah,” he told them. “I know what we look like. What’s up with her though?” he asked as he motioned toward the door.

William sighed. “That girl needs to learn some responsibility.”

“But she’s acting like a human,” Zachary said.

“It’s like Thamuz always tells us,” Ben said, doing his impression of William. “You embody a human, and you get everything that goes with it.”

Zachary turned to face Ben and said, “Like eating and pooping?”

Ben smiled.



6 *Rimmon*

WILLIAM AND BEN SAT WITH CLAIRE, GOING THROUGH THE papers she brought from school. It gave Zachary a chance to check on Bethany, who hadn't left her room since getting home. He knew she'd been a Whisperer like him before taking a human form. Was this all he had to look forward to? Human weakness?

Zachary stood outside Bethany's door. He lifted his hand to knock and hesitated. Was he overstepping his bounds? Probably, but how was he going to find out if he didn't ask? He knocked.

"Go away, William."

"It's um..." He cleared his throat. "It's me. Zack." A moan sounded through the door.

"What do you want?"

What did he want? He told himself he was going to check on her, but that would imply caring. That wasn't it. Worry was more like it. Not for her. Ben had told him, once you become a Talker, you basically become human. Was that

what Bethany had become? Was that what Zachary would become? “Never mind,” he said. “Sorry to bother you.” He started to walk away.

“Ugh,” she said. “Just come in, already.”

He slowly opened the door and looked around the room. It was large with two windows set into gable type dormers. This was definitely a girl’s room. It even smelled like Bethany, a scent he was beginning to appreciate, kind of. There was lace, bedposts, pillows, a vanity table, full length mirrors, and enough lavender to burn his new eyes. Bethany was laying face down on some awful purple bedding, running her fingers over the edge of her broken phone.

“Can I talk to you?” Zachary quietly asked.

She put her head down on the comforter and sighed before taking a deep breath. Then, she rolled over and sat with her legs criss-crossed while holding her phone in her lap like a precious treasure. She raised her eyes and said, “I know what you’re gonna say.”

Zachary stood awkwardly. Bethany patted the bed next to her and said, “Sit down.” He hesitated, then sat, nearly sliding off of the silk covered bed. She laughed lightly and added, “Not so close to the edge this time.” He scooted closer to her, noticing her scent once more. It was fresh, not like the guys he had to be around at school who smelled like a bad mixture of deodorant and sweat.

“I know I’m acting like a child,” she told him. “I don’t know what comes over me. It’s just, sometimes I lose my mind.”

Zachary silently listened.

“You should see me in my true form,” she reminisced as she held her chin up. “Have I told you who I am?” When he shook his head, she said, “I’m Rimmon, the temptress.”

Zachary looked into her eyes. “I’ve heard of you.”

“Of course you have,” she said proudly. “I command thirty-nine legions, leading many to fall.” She held the

cracked electronic device up and said, “And now look at me—I’m reduced to a weeping mess for something as stupid as this.”

Zachary gently rubbed the circle in his pocket. He thought he should tell her he understood. He knew it had no meaning, but since he had first heard its name—a promise ring—he wanted to hold on to it. But he decided it would be best to keep it to himself a little longer. Besides, he knew he wasn’t as weak as Bethany. This was not the same.

She threw the phone on the bed. “That’s not the worst of it, though.”

Zachary looked sideways at her and said, “I don’t understand.”

“Remember what it was like when the Selfish One created this world? And how proud He was of the creatures He created in His image?”

Zachary nodded.

“Remember how Lucifer won this world?”

Zachary smiled. “The greatest day.”

She smiled warmly. “A few simple words, and the Holy One was defeated. We finally had a purpose. You’re good with words while I drive them crazy with flesh. They’re so easy, so quick to fall. It’s glorious.”

“Why is that a problem?”

“Has William told you why it’s forbidden for us to mate with humans?”

“No. Why?”

“I’ll save that for him,” she said. “I knew it was the rule before I agreed to become a Talker. I figured, easy, right? I knew all about it. Besides, people are hideous, fragile forms with their smooth skin and weak bones.” She rolled her eyes. “What they didn’t tell me was the Creator made them incomplete, needy creatures. That’s why it’s so easy to break them. They need each other. William tried to tell me about everything that comes with taking a human body. Anyway,

it's driving me crazy. I try to fill it with all of this," she said as she looked at all the luxuries around her bedroom. "But it's not the same. Have you felt it yet?"

He had no idea what she meant, so he shook his head.

"You will," she told him. "Tell me when you do. I have a plan."

Zachary agreed, although he didn't know what he was agreeing to.

\* \* \*

Rimmon appeared before her thirty-nine legion commanders while Bethany's body slept. Sleep was her only relief from the longing she felt every waking moment. The familiar scent of burning sulfur surrounded her. She was complete in this form.

When the Selfish One created angels, their only desire was to praise Him, the Holy One. They were complete with their souls, not dependent on each other. Their purpose was only to serve their Lord.

Lucifer had taught her she could serve herself if she followed him, if he was her lord. Only then did she realize how glorious she really was. The Selfish One had deprived her of any self-worth.

Her subjects presented themselves for her inspection. One-by-one, her legion commanders showed their great successes, each outdoing the other. One brought her to powerful politicians having illicit affairs. Rimmon was unimpressed with the easy targets. Another bragged of men and women led to incest. She was shown the damage of this great accomplishment—a slightly higher achievement since it damaged not only the adult, but destroyed the child too.

"Well done," Rimmon praised, though she had a new perspective on the ease of leading humans to depravity. On and on they went, bragging of rape and abductions that forced the angels to lose their foothold on the ones they were sent to protect.

One particularly battle-scarred commander displayed a well-known Christian leader whom he'd battled with for several years. Although heavily protected, he had finally given into his temptation—an intern who had opened up to him about her marriage problems. She was beautiful and she needed him. Even after the sin, the battle still raged, destroying his family and followers. This was the first of many victories to come.

But the Holy One had made it too easy for them to fall back under His protection, even after a great sin. That was a luxury given only to the ones created in His image—one more thing the Selfish One had withheld from her kind. She and her legions had made their choice before the Earth was created. There was no turning back. Her only hope was the final defeat of the Selfish One that Lucifer had foretold.

Rimmon knew she must remain vigilant. All of her commanders were waiting for her destruction. All were eager to take her place of great glory. She must fight the urges of her human body. She couldn't fail. She would see Lucifer triumph on the Last Day.

Her only solace was the fact that in her human form, she couldn't be watched or monitored by her fellow demons or the Selfish One's angels. Talkers were unseen by the spirit world. The human body she possessed appeared absolutely ordinary, as if she was not even there. None would know of her struggle. She would complete her human life and perform whatever commission was given to her.

She thanked them for the reports, dreading the return to her human body.



*7 Everything's a Race*

ZACHARY SAT ON A BENCH ON THE INSPIRATION TOWN square, watching people go about their pitiful business. William couldn't explain Zachary's vision. After a couple of weeks, Zachary's ability to see Whisperers passing in and out of the physical realm seemed normal. He knew demons weren't able to see him directly or he would have heard about it when he reported to Zagan during his sleep. The members of the house of Thamuz agreed it was best to keep it secret.

Demons were normal to him anyway. What disturbed him were the angels that made periodic appearances. Although they didn't appear to notice his presence, he felt exposed. If they were to recognize him, he was unprotected.

When he saw an angel watching over his house, he confronted William about Claire. He was told the child was required and to not tell the others. It would make them uncomfortable to know she's still human. William would remedy that problem later. As far as Bethany and Ben were concerned, she was a Whisperer waiting for maturity before

her commission. An angel in the house, whether they could detect the embodied souls or not, wasn't a good idea. Being vanquished was not part of Zachary's plan for advancement in Lucifer's realm. He considered reporting it to Zagan, but decided to keep the secret, for now.

The town of Inspiration was swimming with demons. Lucifer had claimed it, and the evidence was before Zachary's eyes. Whisperers followed busy people unopposed. The enemy did have a small presence in the town. A minor problem.

Things had not gone well with Emma Louise Green. Getting her to put more than two words together was painful, but he knew this one girl stood between him and greatness.

Bethany had helped him learn a little more by asking around. It turns out she was popular a little over a year ago. She was a cheerleader, headed several school committees, and was dating someone on the football team. Her father was a local pastor until his church fired him, causing him to take a job in construction. After that, Emma dropped out of her social circle. But nobody seemed to know anything more.

Emma nearly sprinted out of school at the end of each day, and every time he tried following her, she managed to lose him. Today, he skipped class to get a head start, sitting impatiently on the bench where she'd lost him a day ago. Humans acted out of habit. If coming to this place was one of hers, she would be back, and he would be there.

Zachary spotted her coming around the corner. As she crossed the street toward him, her angels weren't in view. Although he felt better not seeing them, he wondered if seeing them might be safer. After all, he'd been more effective in the shadows than he had been so far as a Talker. Maybe the angels were too. She looked his way while he pretended to pay attention to someone else.

As she kept walking toward him, he stood and turned his back, watching her reflection in a storefront window. His

heart quickened, hoping she didn't see him. She stepped onto the curb and walked up behind him. He breathed in her familiar scent. It was fresh and clean. Holding his breath, he looked down at the reflection of her feet. He had no idea why he felt intimidated by her presence. She was only human.

"For your girlfriend?" she asked from behind.

He raised his eyes and stared into the reflection of Emma Louise Green. "What?" he stammered.

"Hopefully not your mom. That would be creepy," she said as she crossed her arms. "I guess it *could* be for you."

He turned slowly and asked, "What's for me?"

She pointed toward the window. In front of him, several mannequins were wearing Sarah's Secret lingerie. "No. What? I was just..."

Emma held her hands up. "I'm not judging." She put her hands back in her pockets. "You weren't in school today."

Zachary raised an eyebrow. She'd noticed he was missing? He tried to clear his expression, to look as if he didn't care. "I had to pick up some things."

"Yeah? And that's why you're here?" She nodded toward the display.

"No. Not here."

She eyed him suspiciously. "So, where then?"

"My uncle needed some things. I got 'em already."

"So what'd you get?" she asked, looking him up and down.

For some reason, her look made him squirm. "Um," he stammered. He had no idea she'd have so many questions. "I'm having them sent to the house."

"Well," she said, not sure if she bought his explanation, "I'm late. See you tomorrow then?"

He tilted his head, too flustered to know how to answer. How did she do that to him? She was just a regular human, although he could see how some may think her somewhat

pretty. He noted the light catching her eyes making them seem more rich, with a slight golden glow.

“At school?” she prodded

“Right,” he told her nodding, seeming distracted.

As she turned to leave, he quietly cursed to himself. She finally talked to him, and he freaked out. Isn't this what he needed? How else was he going to find out about her?

After a few steps down the sidewalk, Emma stopped, turned, and asked, “Are you hungry?” She walked backwards, avoiding a parking meter without looking. Something about the way she walked in reverse so effortlessly intrigued him. It was like she'd memorized each step.

“I guess,” he said, wondering why she would care. Actually, he was *always* hungry. Since he had his first taste of food, he couldn't get enough of it.

She smiled, waved her hand, and said, “Come on then. I'm late, so we'll have to run.”

As he started walking, she turned and ran. He shook his head and took off after her, easily catching up. The two of them ducked over and around obstacles through the small town streets.

Running was a strange sensation. Zachary reveled in the cool air brushing against his face, and he found himself smiling as he tried to outmaneuver Emma. She headed toward a shop with a green logo then slipped through the front door as it shut behind a woman holding a steaming cup. Emma offered a quick apology and flashed a wink at the small boy holding himself upright with the assistance of his mother's little finger.

Zachary was too late. He had to stop and pull the door open before running into the shop where he was met with several disapproving glances.

Emma had a huge smile on her face as she teased, “You were beat by a girl.”

“Oh, yeah. Well, you cheated,” he said, matching her smile. This wasn’t his normal smile. It felt different, expanding beyond his lips, creasing his new eyes. A strange, but pleasant experience.

“Did not,” she said, acting offended.

“You didn’t tell me it was a race,” he complained.

“Everything’s a race.”

She skipped the long line, walked up to the older woman behind the counter, and told her, “I’m really late. Can you get me the usual? And...” Emma looked at Zachary and asked, “What do you want anyway? Do you like coffee?”

He shrugged. He had no idea what this place had. “I’ve never had it,” he answered.

She grimaced and told the lady, “We better make it a grande hot chocolate and coffee cake. Oh, and a cinnamon roll.” She eyed the counter and added, “and two chocolate chunk cookies.” The lady got all of her stuff and rang it up. Emma handed Zachary his cup, picked up two other cups, and snatched the bag of baked goods precariously between her fingers. She turned before hitting the exit and said, “Thanks, Liddy.” The lady rolled her eyes and waved bye.

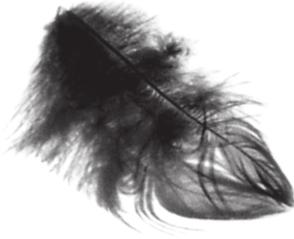
Once out the door, she accelerated to a sprint again with Zachary close behind. They turned down an alley and headed toward a metal door labeled *The Inspiration Daily Report*. Emma paused at the door and asked Zachary, “Can you open it? My hands are full.”

Zachary opened the door, and they went inside. The building was dirty and had ancient machinery scattered haphazardly around an open center space. She headed straight through the mess to a windowed door that looked as if a thousand factory workers had smudged it with their filthy hands.

Once through the door, Zachary noticed the smell was almost like his realm—oil, fire, and dirt. An old man with wiry gray hair was standing behind a disorganized desk. He

looked up and said, “There you are, Emma. I was getting worried.”

“Here you go, Sam,” she responded as she set the bag on his desk. “I got your latte and cranberry orange scone.” She set his food out for him, and seeing the bag wasn’t yet empty, he reached for the opening. She slapped his hand and scolded him, “Get your dirty hands off! What makes you think this is for you? Don’t you see we have a guest?”



8 *Inking the Press*

SAM LOOKED UP AND FINALLY NOTICED ZACHARY. “OH. Hello, my boy.” He pushed his glasses higher on his nose and looked the new guest over. “And you are...?” Sam asked.

“Zachary,” he responded, reaching his hand toward the old man, nearly positive this was the proper greeting ritual.

Sam lifted his hand, noticed it wasn’t as clean as it should be, and dutifully rubbed it on his pants before grabbing Zachary’s. He released Zack’s hand and said, “Oh, I almost forgot,” as he reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a folded twenty dollar bill, placing it on the desk in front of Emma.

She looked at Zachary and hesitantly told Sam, “You know that’s too much, Sam.”

“Don’t be silly,” Sam said smiling. “Consider the rest”—he paused and pursed his lips—“a delivery charge.”

Emma snatched the bill, wrapped her arms around Sam’s neck, and planted a kiss on his cheek. “You know I love you, Samuel Wheat.”

“Of course you do,” Sam laughed. “I’m irresistible.”

Zachary felt out of place. The two genuinely cared about each other. He’d watched humans for centuries. The way they required relationships had always been a great weakness. Perhaps he could take advantage of Emma Louise Green’s compassionate nature. Just the thought of how pleased Zagan would be when he completed his mission so quickly made him grin.

“What’re you smiling at?” Emma asked.

“Nothing.” Zachary straightened.

“You can sit over here,” she told him, clearing a spot at a small desk near the opposite wall. “Eat quick. You can help me when we’re done.”

As he sat, he took a bite of the cinnamon roll. His eyes rolled back, and he marveled at the wonderfully sticky treat. How could something so incredible exist? He reached for the steaming cup and filled his mouth to wash down the sweetness. Zachary screamed and leaned over, spewing the burning chocolate from his mouth. The rich, brown liquid splashed on the floor. Emma stared dumbfounded for several seconds then burst out laughing. Zachary had no idea why she was laughing. She seemed to care about others, but she was cracking up while he was in pain!

“Have you seriously never had hot chocolate?” She smiled.

Zachary pursed his lips and sucked in air to ease the pain. He shook his head no. She asked about coffee, and he shook again.

Emma tilted her head and said, “There’s something different about you, Zack Sable.”

Not only had she noticed that he’d skipped class, she even remembered his last name. So she had been aware of him. “Is that good?” he asked.

She touched her chin. “I haven’t decided yet. You have been stalking me for a week now.”

*She knew he was following her?* Of course she did. Without the advantage of watching from an unseen dimension, he wasn't exactly adept at hiding.

"Sorry," Zachary said. "I didn't mean—"

"Relax, Zack. I've been curious about you, too."

"Me?"

"The new"—she wobbled her hand—"not terrible looking guy in town that knows more about physics than the teacher?" She sat up straight. "How dangerous could you be?"

He smirked. *You have no idea, Emma Louise Green.*

She demonstrated how to drink a hot liquid. Other than the burn that numbed his taste buds, he rather enjoyed the chocolate. As it cooled, he was finally able to really drink it. Once they both finished, she asked Sam, "What do you have for me today?"

Sam wiped the scone crumbs off of his chin before responding, "I've already burned the plates and put them on the windmill. I need two thousand copies off the sheetfed by three. Merna is picking them up at four."

"Where's the online copy?" Emma asked. Sam pointed at a small stack of copy paper on her desk. Emma sighed, "How many times do I have to tell you?" She crossed her arms, giving Sam a stern look. "Stop deleting Wendell's emails."

"Ah," he said, waving his hand. "You know I don't trust that stuff. They're watching our computers."

Emma shook her head and told him, "Who do you think is spying on *your* email? At least send them to me first. You know how long it's gonna take to retype all of this?" She flipped through the stack, looked at Zachary, and said, "I'm gonna need your help, okay?"

She took Zachary into a large room and showed him how to load the stacker. Emma put on an old apron then helped Zachary put on his. She wrapped the ties, reaching both arms around him to cross the strings.

As she came close, he smelled the freshness of her hair and felt the warmth of her breath on the skin above his collar. When she pulled away to tie the strings at his waist, he missed the warmth of the close proximity of her body. His heart quickened as he wondered how her breasts would feel against his chest.

What was he thinking? She's human!

She cleaned the suction heads on the antique Heidelberg letterpress and flipped it on. As the press whirred to life, Emma showed him how to ink the blankets. She explained how to keep the feeder—which looked like a windmill, explaining the nickname—loaded with paper while taking the finished prints off of the stacker and piling them on a pallet.

“Keep this going until all of that is finished.” She pointed to a small stack of blank paper. “Then we'll set up the folder. I have to go update the website with Wendell's copy. You got this?” she asked with a hopeful look.

Zachary nodded, and she headed back into the office. He watched her sit at the desk and type as she quickly flipped through the stack of copy paper Sam had provided. While she worked, he found himself watching her pile her hair on top of her head and stick a pencil in it to make it stay.

She fought with a stubborn lock that kept falling in front of her ear. As she flipped through the pages, the wisp of ebony defiantly marched down her slender neck. She typed, then paused to tuck the hair behind her ear. She flipped pages, and the dark trail would float down her neck and tease her smooth jawline. With a quick gesture, Emma forced it behind her ear again.



9 *Rules of Engagement*

ZAGAN GREETED TIAMANICUS IN THE DARK WORLD. “THE Great One is pleased with your progress. It seems your presence has distracted Emma Louise Green. I may have misjudged Thamuz and his choice for your assignment.”

Tiamanicus was unsure how to take the comment. He was told all spoke highly of him, but Zagan clearly didn’t think him capable. It didn’t matter. He would prove himself worthy of command. Even Zagan would see it.

“Distracted?” Tiamanicus asked. What does Zagan know of his actions?

“Yes,” Zagan hissed. “Rimmon’s minions have made some progress against the angels. The advance has been minimal; however, we have not suffered any losses.”

Rimmon? Bethany has forces attacking? Why hasn’t she told him?

Zagan went on, “We attribute their successes to your work. You must share your secret. I would find it most enlightening.”

“Upon completion of my commission, master,” Tiamanicus said as he bowed to the great Zagan.

Zagan’s yellow, slitted eyes bored into his. “Very well. We shall speak soon.”

\* \* \*

Zachary grimaced and threw his arm over his face to block the morning sun. Who’s brilliant idea was it to place a bed directly in front of a window on the east side of a house? He knew it was his own fault for not closing the blinds before going to bed, but who wants the sun on their face in the morning? He moaned, lifted his head, and squinted to take in his surroundings.

He looked around the room which was vastly different than the spiritual realm. The walls were painted with a bright white. The desk and chair were also nearly white. The bed comforter—which was nearly all on the floor because he tended to push it off so he could feel the cool air on his skin while he slept—was also lightly colored. Why did everything in this realm have to be so bright?

Zachary peeked under his arm down the thin, white sheet. He paused at a protrusion from just below his waist. “What the hell?” He took his arm off his face and struggled to see what caused it. As he lifted the sheet with both hands, he revealed a rigid erection. Zachary stared at it for several seconds, wondering what could have coaxed it to attention. He thought of the dream he’d been having. Emma had brushed her lips against his. A slight smile to creep over his lips.

William walked into Zachary’s bedroom. “I’m told you made contact.”

Zachary flew to a sitting position, attempting to cover his embarrassing state. As if it were possible.

William looked away. “Meet me in the study. We have to go over some rules.”

“Okay,” Zachary said. “Can I have a minute?”

William nodded and closed the door.

*Awesome, Zack. Now William knows you're a pervert.* Luckily, the shock had taken his mind off of Emma. He wasn't sure how he could have dressed. He slipped on the jeans and t-shirt he'd left on the floor then walked bare-foot down the hallway toward the curved staircase. He dreaded seeing William after what just happened—a feeling Tiamicus had never experienced. In the spiritual realm he was proud, always willing to speak of his actions. This was new. Having to face William filled him with anxiety. He felt ashamed.

“Hi, Zack!” Claire screeched as she ran and jumped into his arms. He breathed in her scent. Ben was taking forever in the bathroom, so Claire let him use hers. Zachary headed in and sat on the toilet. The shampoo bottle was open, and since the toilet was right next to the tub, he couldn't help but pick it up. He brought it to his nose and smiled. That scent belonged to Claire.

He knew her presence was dangerous, but her excitement to see him everyday overshadowed his fear. She was just a human, albeit with an angel watching over her, but her exuberance made him feel comforted. He couldn't understand it. He just accepted it.

After he had finished and washed his hands, Zachary headed back into the hall. “Are you gonna take me to the bus?” Claire asked with a hopeful smile.

“Sorry, short stuff. I have to talk to Uncle Will this morning,” he told her.

“Awe,” Claire moaned. “I like *you* to take me.”

“Come on, shrimp,” Bethany said. “I'll take you. Zack had a *hard* time getting up this morning,” she said as she eyed him. He had no idea why Bethany looked at him like that. Zachary put Claire down, and she frowned as Bethany helped her gather her stuff. Claire turned, smiled at Zachary, and waved as the two of them left.

“What was that about?” Ben asked Zachary. “Bethany wasn’t in your room this morning, was she?”

“I don’t think so. Why?” Zachary asked slowly.

Ben shrugged. “Just wondering.”

“I have to talk to William,” Zachary said then quietly walked toward the office. The door was open, so he silently stepped inside to see William studying an old book. He stood there, watching, not wanting to be noticed. Zachary swallowed.

“Zack,” William said. “Come in. Take a seat.” He slid a photo from his desk, put it face down in a drawer, and motioned to a chair placed directly in front of him. Zachary trekked in and sat. William spun the old book and pushed it in front of Zachary. William pointed at the page and commanded, “Read.”

Zachary leaned forward and read out loud, “And it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born unto them, that the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose.”

Zachary stopped reading and asked, “Why are you reading from this book? The Great One speaks of its lies!”

William leaned forward and said, “There are some things you need to understand. You know this book?”

“Of course,” Zachary told him. “This is the first book of Moses. It speaks of the greatest day. The day the Great One taught mankind the truth.”

“So you know it’s not all lies then?” William asked.

Zachary shrugged. “Not all,” he conceded.

William questioned, “What do you know of the passage you just read?” When Zachary didn’t answer William continued, “We have hidden the truth from mankind for centuries. We’ve led men to believe it’s not possible for us to take physical form. The sons of God refer to a group of embodied souls—Talkers like us. Do you understand?”

Zachary shook his head. He was relieved William hadn't brought up what he'd witnessed this morning, but what did this book have to do with him?

William went on, "This book speaks of this group to warn us. You know of Screamers?"

"Naturally," Zachary answered.

"Tell me what you know."

"Well," Zachary said. "They're the vanquished. The defeated."

William prodded for more.

"Stripped of form."

"You were warned of the danger of becoming a Talker?"

"I knew the risk," Zachary said. "Those the angels defeat while in bodily form are to be forever tormented. Forsaken by the Great One. No different than those vanquished in battle."

"The truth is, it is of no consequence what the humans know of us," William told him. "Angels are the threat. You see, all people, no matter who they are, have angels watching over them. The Holy One is always waiting for humans to turn to Him. Until death, they have the chance to accept His gift of salvation. The gift of their Savior. The gift of Christ. No matter what they've said or done during life. Whisperers that have accepted the role of Talkers are the only exception. Angels and demons can't see Talkers. We appear as inconsequential while in human form."

"Why are you telling me this?" Zachary asked, not sure where he was going.

William took a breath before continuing. "As Talkers, we have neither angels or demons watching over us. Therefore, the sons of God broke a cardinal rule in this passage. Do you understand?"

Zachary shook his head.

"Intimate physical contact between humans brings together more than just physical bodies," William explained.

“The Selfish One created people as incomplete without both His presence and a close relationship with another human. Essentially, intimacy exposes the souls to the heavenly beings.”

Zachary thought he understood what William meant. That was what Bethany was referring to that day in her room. “So, when the sons of God had sex with the humans, they were discovered? The angels saw they had no souls?”

“And they were forsaken by Lucifer,” William told him. “When you take on human form, you get everything that comes with it. Whether we admit it or not, physical attraction is part of human existence. Some demons find it too much of a burden and choose to cut the commission short. Although it leads to disgrace, it’s better than the alternative.”

“Becoming a Screamer,” Zachary stated. A shiver rattled his bones. Until the previous day, Zachary had never considered he could become attracted to such a fragile being. He didn’t even know what attraction was. He had no idea what it was about Emma Louise Green that affected him, but he knew he must be careful with her. “Have you lost any souls under your charge?” he asked hesitantly.

William nodded solemnly.



IO *Bethany's Confession*

“PISS OFF, BASTARD!” BETHANY YELLED AT THE BLOND SIX-foot-two letterman who was making a show of confronting her in the hallway.

Zachary watched the lower forms of Whisperers circle and speak into the crowd's ears. He wondered if he'd been unaware of Talkers as a Whisperer. Surely not! He was *not* a lower form.

“Ooh,” the blond said, mocking fear. “Who's the new boyfriend?”

“Get this,” one of the letterman's cronies said. “He's her cousin.” They all laughed.

“Is that what you're into?” the blond asked. “A little cousin-on-cousin action?” he teased, as he humped the air, prompted by his demon companion.

“Just following your mom's advice, Brad,” Bethany responded. “Turns out, that's why you came out retarded. Couldn't keep her hands off her brother. I guess that would

be your uncle-daddy Robert. But you just call him Dad, don't you?"

Brad started to attack Bethany, but Zachary stepped between them, matching Brad's height and athletic build.

"Is there a problem, gentlemen?" the Vice Principal said as he stepped between the boys.

"No problem," Brad said. "We were just going to class."

The Vice Principal grunted his disbelief, causing the lettermen crew to turn and walk off, slugging each other's arms in some sort of alpha male contest while their Whisperers darted in and out of this realm. The Vice Principal glared at Bethany and Zachary then lowered his head. He studied the contents of a folder as he silently walked off.

Bethany was clearly upset. She took off quickly down the hallway. Zachary caught up to her.

"I've seen him watching you," Zachary said, trying to match her pace.

"Oh," she responded, not stopping. "Why should I care?"

"It looks like you do."

Bethany stopped and scowled at Zachary. She raised both hands and shoved him hard. The motion caught him off guard, causing his body to fall against a door that opened easily with his weight. He stumbled backward several steps before regaining his balance as she rushed through the door.

He kept his eyes on her as she yelled, "He was my boyfriend, okay! You can't tell William," Bethany explained. "He was the captain of the varsity football team as a junior and considered the hottest guy in school. I figured if I was going to fit in, it only made sense to date him. I became one of the most popular girls in school within a week. All of the girls either hated me or wanted to be my friend, while all of the guys were secretly hitting on me. When we first started dating, William had his 'talk' with me." Bethany air-quoted. "You've had the talk, right? About the rules?"

Zachary nodded. How could he forget? It was only a couple of hours ago.

“No big deal, right? Humans are all ugly and weak, so it shouldn’t be hard. Plus, since that’s one of the ways you become a Screamer, there’s no way I was doing that!”

*One of the ways.* Zachary thought.

Bethany continued, “To keep up the girlfriend charade, I started making out with Brad. At first, it was disgusting, but after a few times, I started feeling something. Something really strong. I can’t explain it, but I needed it. I craved the touching, his hands on me. I would tease him by sitting on his lap and shifting my body around. I reveled in the feel of his desire pressing into me.

“It was so easy to turn him on. He’d hit the jackpot with me,” Bethany said, pressing her body to Zachary to prove her point. “The one thing I knew about was how to entice desire.” Bethany’s look shifted between Zachary’s eyes and mouth as she breathed on his lips, knowing the affect she had on men.

She *was* affecting Zachary. His mind drifted to Emma’s breath, soft skin, and full breasts. His breath quickened, and he swallowed hard.

“Except for one thing,” Bethany pulled away and paused. “That stupid rule!” She leaned against the wall. “When I told him I wouldn’t go all the way, he pleaded. He said he wouldn’t tell anyone. I told him I couldn’t, and he got mad.” She began tearing up. “He called me a bitch. He said I was a tease, a prude. The next day at school, I was nothing. Most of my friends abandoned me, and his friends made fun of me.”

A tear streamed down her face, and she said, “The worst thing was... I wanted it more than he did.” She pointed to herself and laughed, “Me? A Prude? I invented lust! I was my own victim. But if I was going to fail, if I was going to become a Screamer, it wouldn’t be due to his sorry ass!”

The lunch lady pushed through the door then stopped. Seeing she'd interrupted a private moment, she said, "You're not supposed to be in here." She looked at Bethany wiping tears from her eyes, gave Zachary a harsh stare, and asked, "Is this boy bothering you?"

Bethany responded, "No, he was just being a good friend."

The lady still looked suspicious, but let them leave without writing them up for being in a restricted area.



I I *A Walk After Work*

AFTER WORK AT *The Inspiration Daily Report* THAT afternoon, Zachary and Emma walked home. Technically, Zachary didn't work there since he wasn't actually paid, but over the last couple weeks, he'd become quite adept at running the old Heidelberg press. Samuel couldn't pass up the free labor, and Zachary relished the chance to spend time with the target of his commission. With Bethany's forces attacking, he knew his victory would occur soon. He knew he wouldn't have much more time in this realm, so he might as well make the best of it.

The air was brisk, and the sky lit with brilliant colors as the sun dropped below the town skyline. Emma cinched her coat and pulled the collar tight. Despite the chill, Zachary left his jacket open. The bite of the cool evening air reminding him of the privilege of his human embodiment.

They walked together each night, laughing about Samuel's general paranoia and his inability to eat without getting crumbs and latte foam in his scruffy, gray beard.

“I don’t trust those new-fangled things,” Emma said with a mocking tone. “Phones should be for calling people, not sending notes and Twitter-facing and all that nonsense.”

“You know they can tap those too, right?” Zachary asked, imitating Emma’s argument.

“Ah!” Emma said, frowning and waving his comment off. “At least they can’t trace where you go.”

They both laughed.

Emma stopped in front of him and smiled. She bit her lip; then, Zachary felt her cold hand slip into his. His eyes wandered from her large eyes to her elegant nose to her smooth jaw to her full pink lips. For a human, she was not particularly ugly. Her lip lightly quivered, and he realized she was cold.

“I’m sorry,” he apologized. “You’re freezing. Here.” He pushed her hand under his jacket and around his back. “Is that better?”

She smiled slightly. “How are you not cold? Are you always this warm?” She buried both of her arms under his jacket, pulling herself against him and exhaling against his chest. Zachary inhaled the scent of flowers in her hair and started to raise his hands to return her embrace. He hesitated, not sure if it would overstep his bounds. But she was holding him! She started it!

He wrapped her in his arms and said, “I kind of like the cold. It’s never cold where I’m from.”

With her face against his chest, she asked, “Where *do* you come from, Zachary Sable?”

That was a mistake! What was he supposed to say? The spiritual realm where the dark forces work to ensure mankind’s ultimate separation from the Creator? Oh, and by the way, I’m here specifically to destroy you.

“South,” he told her, hoping it would quell her interest.

She pulled away slightly and raised an eyebrow. “That’s a little vague. Is that like Louisiana south or Mexico south?”

*Great! What had he started? He didn't even know where his body came from. His first day was kind of a blur.*

"Arizona," he said since that was the only warm place that came to mind.

"Zack from Arizona," she said. "There's something different about you, Zachary Sable."

He scanned her eyes and thought, *You have no idea, Emma Louise Green.*

\* \* \*

Zachary quietly opened the door and closed it ever-so-gently behind him. The house was dark. He knew he shouldn't have walked her all the way home. And he definitely shouldn't have stood on the sidewalk in front of her house talking to her for the last two hours, but learning about her life interested him. Human lives had always seemed so meaningless and quick. Their lives were so short compared to the many centuries he'd lived since Creation. It was strange how different life seemed when you lived with them.

Emma had talked about her dad and how empty his life was since her mom died almost a year ago. As a Whisperer, a year was like the blink of an eye, but now, a day seems almost endless. In fact, a day was twenty-eight thousand six hundred and eighteen blinks. Twenty-three thousand four hundred and fourteen breaths. He had counted. He had gained an unexpected appreciation for a day, a week, and a month.

Her dad had lost his job at the church shortly after her mom died. She told him how hard it was watching her father's life fall apart so quickly. The year before, they were a normal happy family. People loved her father as the church pastor, her mom wasn't sick, and Emma was on the cheerleading squad.

"How was your date, Romeo," a voice said, startling him back to reality. A light came on in the foyer, and he saw Bethany sitting in the wingback chair that was neatly encircled by the spiral staircase.

“It wasn’t a date,” Zachary said. “I’m working on my commission. What were *you* doing?”

Bethany ignored the question and folded her arms across her chest, eyeing him. “Then what’s with the sneaking?”

“I wasn’t sneaking. The lights were out. I didn’t want to wake anybody.” He shrugged. That was it. He was just being considerate, wasn’t he?

“So how was it?” Bethany asked.

“How was what?”

“Your little *date* with the human girl?”

“I told you. It wasn’t a date.”

“Sure,” she said, sarcastically. “Did you kiss her?”

“What? No!” The truth was, he did kiss her. He didn’t mean to. He didn’t expect it, but she kept getting closer and wham! It was amazing. The smell of her breath. The taste of her lips. The warmth of her body pressed against him. He’d never experienced anything like it.

“You are such a liar,” she teased, giving him a sly smile.

Bethany uncrossed her arms and stood up slowly. For the first time, Zachary realized what she was wearing. Or wasn’t wearing. Her shimmery top was thin, draping just above her belly button. The material clung seductively to her breasts. Her panties, a small shimmering triangle, dipped low on her hips.

Zachary’s heart quickened. Attraction was new to him, and Bethany was nearly as pretty as Emma Louise Green.

Nearly.

Bethany slowly walked up to him. She placed her hands on his chest and whispered, “Do you like her?”

“Of course not!” Zachary whispered, trying not to wake anybody.

“Well...” she paused. “You do think she’s pretty, right?” She breathed on his lips and watched his mouth quiver.

Bethany worked her hands up his chest and traced his broad shoulders. She lightly pressed her body against his,

smiling slightly as she felt his body respond, pressing into her belly.

“We shouldn’t be doing this,” Zachary whispered. “Someone’ll see.”

Bethany shook her head, lightly brushed her lips against his, then pulled away teasing him. Her heart felt like it was going to jump out of her chest. “You don’t get it, do you?” she asked. “Nobody’s watching us.”

He looked into her eyes. “What if we’re caught?”

“Nobody watches us,” she repeated slowly. “Angels... demons... nobody. We can do whatever we want.”

Zachary gently placed his hands on her shoulders. He looked into her eyes, but they weren’t Bethany’s. He saw the deep, rich brown eyes of Emma Louise Green. His breath quickened. He brought his hands together under her long soft hair. With both hands, he began to trace her spine down the curve of her back. He marveled at the arch of her lower back and traced the low line of her panties.

Bethany responded with a gentle push, placing him firmly against the door. She thought, *I’m finally going to do this. After so long.* Her body quivered with anticipation as she pressed against him.

Bethany whispered, “Do you think I’m pretty?”

“Of course I do. You’re beautiful,” Zachary whispered with his eyes closed and his heart pounding.

Bethany gently kissed Zachary’s lips and said, “Will you make love to me?”

He swallowed hard and whispered, “Yes... yes, Emma.”

Bethany kissed him hard. Zachary started to kiss her back when she pulled away.

“Emma?” Bethany shouted.

Zachary snapped his eyes open to see Bethany’s furious look. He heard the sound of her palm connecting with his face before he felt the sting.

“Emma!” she yelled again. “You’re thinking about her?”

Zachary froze with his hand holding his reddening cheek. "I didn't mean to—"

"Are you crazy?" she screamed. She stepped away from him then motioned toward her body and shouted, "Look at me! And you're thinking of her?"

The hall light turned on, and William called out, "What's going on?" He stepped into view and saw Bethany and Zachary at the front door and asked, "Beth, are you okay?"

"Oh, trust me! *I'm* fine!" She flipped her thumb toward Zachary. "*He's* the one with the problem!"

Ben stumbled out of his room, looked over the rail, and sized up the situation. He narrowed his eyes and met Bethany's. She looked at Ben and huffed then quickly began to walk upstairs.

"What's going on?" Claire asked as she stumbled out of her bedroom, rubbing her eyes and wearing the familiar fish-girl nightie. Ben had told Zachary it was called a mermaid, which made absolutely no sense. It had something to do with a movie Claire liked, but how could a girl be a fish?

Bethany reached the top of the stairs and looked at Claire. She picked her up and said, "It's nothing, Sweetie. Let's get you back to bed."

Claire smiled at Bethany and said, "I like your PJs." Bethany softened at the little girl's comment. Claire yawned and said, "I think you're the prettiest girl in the whole world," as she laid her head on Bethany's shoulder.

Bethany glared at Zachary and headed toward Claire's room. "I can't be, because *you're* the prettiest girl ever," Bethany teased.

"I love you, Beth," Claire said as the two of them disappeared into the room.

William looked at Zachary suspiciously. "Is there something you need to tell me?"

*Um... yes. Your fake demon daughter just tried to seduce me!*

“No.”

“You sure?” William asked.

Zachary nodded.

“Okay. You better get to bed.”

Zachary looked at Ben, who rolled his eyes and went back to his room.



I 2 *A Foolish Move*

RIMMON STEPPED INTO VIEW OF ONE OF THE ARCHANGELS. One of her legion commanders had warned her about going into battle. This was clearly not allowed while her physical body slept. “Remember your place,” she’d hissed, reminding him *she* was the commander.

Her legions attacked from the opposite side, but this angel continued looking directly into her eyes. His eyes seemed almost human. She wavered as he stared directly into her soul. Did he know about her? Surely not!

She reminded herself that she was Rimmon, the great and powerful temptress. She could distract him. She could cause Emma Louise Green to give in to her lust, to her true desires. She knew the power she yielded.

She raised her sword. The celestial steel gleamed in the brightness of his light. She watched his stance grow straight and strong as he raised his sword. Secretly, she longed for the ability to stand straight and tall like she did centuries ago,

before the centuries of wounds sustained in battles that had won her the command.

The angel lunged into her quickly. As she spun, she felt the heat of his blade so close to her skin she almost thought he'd cut her. She moved quickly and continued the spin into him, thrusting hard. He twisted and threw his legs into a perfect split, performing a backward flip. Landing squarely on his feet, the angel thrust hard at her left thigh. She felt the wetness of the wound trickle down her leg.

*I'm stronger than him. I am faster, greater,* she reminded herself. Where were her legions? Surely the other angel didn't occupy them all!

He smiled and leapt over the top of her as he slashed hard across her shoulder, cutting deep. She screamed in pain then threw herself against his weight, thrusting wildly, catching his right arm. He didn't react to the wound. He reached down, clutched her wrist, and squeezed hard. His grip was incredibly strong. She fought to keep hold of her weapon, but she felt her grip wavering.

*He will not defeat me,* she thought.

She cried out in frustration and buried her other hand in his stomach. Her thick nails penetrated his flesh and her lips formed a humorless smile as his leaking wound warmed her grip. He screamed and released her.

Rimmon smiled as she spun around, striking hard directly toward his midsection. The force of her lunge threw her off her feet, and she fell to her knees. He was nowhere to be found. She had him. This didn't make sense. Where was he?

She turned. The angel was on his knees as Ornias, commander of one of her legions, stood over him, raising his sword to make the fatal blow.

"He's mine," Rimmon hissed at her subordinate.

Ornias's face twisted with rage as he brought the sword down hard despite her command. He stopped mid-

swing. His face contorted as his gaze slowly dropped to his abdomen. A bright blade was buried deep within him. His eyes pleaded as he looked up at Rimmon.

The angel stood and placed his foot on Ornias' distorted hips. He kicked hard, and Ornias fell back, his mouth open in a silent scream. Rimmon turned her eyes to the ground as her battle worn commander found his voice. She fought her instincts and forced her eyes back to Ornias as his skin began to melt and fall from his bones. She cowered as his bones dried and collapsed into a pile of dust that blew away in the celestial breeze until all that was left behind was a bodiless spirit screaming, forcing her to drop her weapon so she could shield her ears.

She had vanquished a few, but they were the enemy. They didn't count. That sight and sound brought pride. She'd even seen others in her legion vanquished, but always from a distance. A far away scream was normal in battle. A flash of light on the horizon as the fight continued.

Now, she would share the same fate.

The angel stood tall and raised his blade for another killing stroke. She scrambled for her weapon, but she'd dropped it out of reach. What was she doing here? She knew the rules. How did she let herself be so foolish? She was a leader! She was a commander! Her time in human form had weakened her.

This was to be her end. All would mock her memory. Failure at the hands of an angel. Failure due to Emma Louise Green. What was special about her? Why was she so protected?

The blade shimmered in the light of the powerful angel. She closed her eyes and waited for the inevitable.

\* \* \*

Bethany sat straight up, eyes filled with terror. The sheets stuck to her wet skin. Jumping to her feet, she desperately searched for her sword. She couldn't find it! She panicked,

screaming and swinging wildly. Shadows danced on the walls as the wind blew through the trees outside. She braced herself for the celestial steel blade.

But there was no blade. There was no angel. Her heart pounded in her chest.

Her heart! Her heart was beating! She was breathing! She was human!

Bethany put her hands on her knees and tried to slow her breathing. She fell to her knees then wiped her forehead with her arm. It did nothing but smear sweat and hair across her face.

She scooted off the bed and tilted her head back, trying to slow her heart rate. Rolling her head around, she tried to peel her sweat-soaked hair from her back. She felt disgusting. She looked at herself in the freestanding full length mirror. It looked like she had just been dragged from a lake.

“Ugh!” Her shear top was stuck to her like reptilian skin that had yet to fall off.

The door burst open, and she froze. Ben ran in yelling, “What is it? Are you okay?”

They both stood, staring at each other. Ben scanned down her nearly exposed body. He stopped breathing as his eyes lingered a beat too long on her feminine curves.

“Ben,” Bethany whispered. He stared. “Ben,” she said again as she yanked at the twisted sheet on her bed. She gave the sheet a hard tug, and it came loose. She covered herself then faced him. “Ben,” she said again. His eyes met hers, and she said, “You have to go.”

Ben’s eyes wandered down the sheet she held against her, and she whispered sternly, “Ben. You have to leave. Go take care of yourself!”

He locked eyes with her and nodded. He turned to leave and bumped into Claire. “Sorry,” he mumbled as he hurried back to his bedroom, slamming the door behind him.

Claire looked at Ben then turned back toward Bethany. This was the second time tonight Claire had been woken by a commotion in the house. "What's wrong with Ben?" she asked.

Bethany said, "He's a boy. Boys have all kinds of problems." Bethany walked to the sleepy child, took her hand, and said, "I'm sorry, Sweetie. You've been having a bad night. Let's go back to bed."

"Can I sleep with you tonight?"

Bethany kissed the top of her head and inhaled the baby shampoo. Claire always insisted William buy the kids kind because it doesn't have the "stinging eyes stuff" in it. That smell will always be Claire's to her.

"Sure you can. Let me fix the bed." She pulled at the wet sheets and piled them on the floor. After spreading her comforter out, she grabbed a soft throw blanket from her love seat and tucked Claire in before going to take a quick shower.

By the time she dried off and put on a nightie, Claire was breathing deeply. Bethany gently slipped under the throw, and Claire cuddled up to her.

"I love you, Beth," the little girl whispered sleepily.

"I love you, too," Bethany whispered then kissed her forehead.

Bethany rested her chin on the girl's head and relaxed, feeling the warm breath on her chest. She wondered if she would have been different if she had embodied a young child. Would she seem as innocent and loving as the girl sleeping in her arms?



### I3 *A Walk to School*

CLAIRE HUGGED ZACHARY AND SAID, “SEE ‘YA LATER, alligator.”

Zachary smiled and replied, “After a while, then.”

“You’re *supposed* to say ‘crocodile.’ I told you a hundred times already.” Claire rolled her eyes.

“I don’t get it. What do alligators and crocodiles have to do with saying goodbye?”

As Claire turned around and climbed onto the first step of the school bus, Zachary studied her mermaid backpack. She stopped and turned her head. “Because it rhymes, silly.”

The bus driver said, “Come on, Claire. Take a seat.”

“He doesn’t get anything,” she told the driver as she climbed aboard.

The driver watched Claire walk down the aisle. Zachary could see the Whisperer talking to him as the driver’s eyes followed the six-year-old girl. Once she was seated, the driver nodded to Zachary, and Zachary glared at him. The door closed and Zachary lingered, watching Claire’s head pop up

midway down the bus. She waved to him as the brakes hissed and the bus pulled away.

Zachary didn't trust that guy with her. In fact, he didn't trust any human with Claire. He could see how evil humans were. He knew the thoughts Whisperers planted in their minds, and he knew how often they indulged those twisted desires. What was confusing was how others could be good and caring amidst the dark forces surrounding them.

Bethany was in William's office with the door closed, and Zachary could tell she was in trouble based on the screaming and pounding. Most of the shouting was William, but he could hear Bethany defending herself. He couldn't make out the words, but the tone was clear. When Claire asked him to take her to the bus, he jumped at the chance to leave, if only for a few minutes.

He knew it had to do with what happened last night. He couldn't believe he'd almost given into her. What would have happened? Is that how William lost the other Talker? Was Bethany to blame? He had to be more careful.

Zachary walked back to the house and into the kitchen. William and Bethany were still shouting. He looked at Ben, who put his cereal bowl in the sink and ran water into it.

"Must've really screwed up this time," Ben said.

"Is this normal?" Zachary asked, motioning toward the commotion.

"Not like this." Ben's lip twitched. "When she breaks something or loses a phone, she gets in trouble, but William's really mad this time. What happened last night?"

"Nothing."

"Something happened. He's never been this angry."

"It was nothing, really."

"So something *did* happen." Ben pulled a stool up and sat. "Spill it."

"It's no big deal."

“Let me be the judge of that,” Ben said as he leaned forward.

“Well,” Zachary paused, not sure if he should be saying anything. “You can’t tell anyone.”

“No problem,” Ben said, nodding his head. “Just tell me.”

“We kind of...”

“What? You kind of what?” Ben asked as he sat straight. Zachary shrank in embarrassment. “Made out.”

“What?” Ben exploded, and slapped his hands on the counter.

William’s office door slammed, causing both boys to jump. Bethany stormed through the kitchen, snatched her backpack off the counter, and scowled at Zachary. Without missing a step, she headed toward the front door.

The office door swung open, and William shouted, “We’re not done talking about this!”

Bethany spun and curtly quipped, “Well, *I* am.” She looked at both boys, who were staring at her, and said, “Are you coming or are you gonna stand there with those stupid faces?” She swung the door open and stormed out, not bothering to close it behind her.

The boys looked at William. He motioned his eyes toward Bethany, so both of them grabbed their bags and rushed out the door.

Ben ran up to her and shouted, “You made out with Zack?”

“Hey!” Zachary said as he hurried to catch up with them.

“No, Zack! You don’t understand!” Ben said. “What the hell, Beth?”

“You said you wouldn’t tell.” Zachary narrowed his eyes at Ben as he struggled to maintain their pace.

“So you’re just gonna break the code for *him*?” Ben shouted as he threw his arms out. Bethany ignored him and kept walking. Ben grabbed her arm and forced her to stop. “You told me we couldn’t. What was that about?”

“I told you it was nothing,” Zachary said as he stopped right behind Bethany.

Bethany swung around and screamed, “Nothing?” She slammed her forearm into Zachary’s chest. “It was nothing?”

Zachary took a step back and eyed her sideways. “It wasn’t serious. Was it?”

Bethany huffed and stepped around him, marching toward the school. Zachary turned to follow her.

Ben launched himself at Zachary, shouting, “Keep your hands off her!” Zachary fell back a couple steps then spun to see Ben’s enraged face as he wound up for a second attack. Zachary straightened his arm and easily pushed the fourteen-year-old away. Ben stumbled back a few steps then said, “I was here first, Zack!”

Bethany stopped and held her jaw tightly clenched. “That’s not what this is about, you idiots!” Both boys stopped and looked at her. “Why are boys so stupid?” she huffed. “It doesn’t have anything to do with me kissing Zack or Zack kissing me.”

“You kissed her!” Ben smacked Zachary’s arm, followed by a retaliatory smack.

“Ugh!” Bethany growled. “I went into battle last night.”

“You what?” Ben’s mouth hung open.

“Wait,” Zachary said. “We can do that?”

“Yes, you idiot,” Ben said. “We’re still demons. At least when our bodies are sleeping.”

“But,” Zachary stammered.

“Bethany,” Ben said, putting his hand on her shoulder. “You’re not strong enough.”

She threw his hand off and spat, “I’m a commander.”

“Yeah. But you’ve been here for... like six months. And it’s against the rules.”

Bethany set her jaw and said, “I’m sick of all these stupid rules! And I can still kick your ass!”

“That’s not fair!” Ben told her. “It’s not my fault I got stuck in this stupid, immature body. Why didn’t I get that one?” He pointed to Zachary. “Seriously, do you have any idea what it’s like for a boy going through *puberty*?”

Zachary shook his head. “What do you mean, Beth? Why’s William so mad?”

“It’s nothing,” Bethany said as she turned and started walking.

“I’ve heard that before.” Ben caught up with her.

Zachary quickened his pace. “What happened?”

She kept walking without turning. “I told you—it’s nothing.”

“Beth,” Zachary said. “We’re here to help each other. What happened?”

Bethany stopped and dropped her eyes to the ground. Zachary watched her jaw quiver. A tear formed in her eye. He watched as it ran down her cheek, caught on her nose, worked its way over her small nostril, and stopped on the tip. As the gathering of salt and water grew, he could see the reflection of the morning sun glistening in her sadness. Something happened. Something big. Something that shook Bethany’s soul.

Zachary looked up to see the usual group of travelers on their usual street going to their usual places. Nobody took notice of the three of them talking in front of an empty bench.

“It was stupid, I know,” Bethany said without raising her eyes. “I was so mad.” She looked at Zachary. “When you said her name last night...”

Zachary looked at her. “Emma?”

“I don’t know what happened. I’ve never felt anything like it before. I wanted to destroy Emma Green. I went to attack her, but...” she trailed off.

“What?” Ben asked.

“The archangels,” Zachary said in monotone.

“You defeated an archangel? And you’re crying?” Ben asked, his eyes wide.

Bethany raised her face toward Ben. Tears ran down her cheek. She shook her head. “It’s Orniyas.”

“One of your commanders?” Ben asked. “He vanquished one? Did Zagan give him your legions?”

She shook her head. “Orniyas was defeated.”

“Why are you so upset?” Ben raised one side of his upper lip. “Did you... like him?”

Bethany scrunched her face. “Oh,” she gasped. “God, no! I hated him!”

Zachary and Ben look dumbfounded.

“I’ve never seen one of us,” she paused, “turned before.”

“A Screamer?” Ben asked. “But it wasn’t you.”

Bethany nodded. “The sound was indescribable. Horrible. When the archangel turned to me, I saw into his eyes.”

“Hatred?” Ben asked.

“That’s just it,” she said. “It wasn’t hate.” She wrapped her arms around Ben and pulled herself into him, burying her face in his shoulder. Ben looked shocked and held his hands behind her awkwardly. He looked at Zachary who just shrugged. Ben slowly placed his hands on her lower back, and she pulled him in closer. With her face buried in his chest, she added with a muffled voice, “He was about to strip me of my spiritual form, and he didn’t hate me. It was like destroying me caused him pain,” she sobbed uncontrollably. “I was defeated. Vanquished. His blade came down hard.”

Suddenly, Bethany pushed Ben hard enough to make him stumble. “Geez, Ben.” She shivered and sneered at him. Ben shrugged. “I’m telling you about my defeat, and that’s how you respond?”

Ben raised one palm while adjusting himself with the other hand and apologized. “Puberty! I already told you. I can’t help it.”

Zachary glared at him, and Bethany chuckled. Both boys looked at her, not sure what was funny. Bethany laughed pointing at Ben and Zachary. She laughed harder, doubling over with her hands on her knees to keep herself from falling. She tried to stand, but gave up and collapsed on the bus stop bench, laughing so hard she could barely talk.

“Look at us,” she managed to get out. “We watched all Creation.” She laughed. “The fall of man. The rise and fall of empires.” She laughed again. Both boys started to chuckle, still not sure what was so funny. “Centuries of”—she caught her breath—“inspiring humans to deny God. And a few months of this”—she pointed to her body—“and look at us.”

She pointed at Ben. “All he can think about are tits and ass.” She pointed at Zachary and laughed. “He’s falling for the girl he’s commissioned to corrupt.” Zachary shook his head vehemently. “And I’m freaking jealous of the lame brunette he’s in love with! Seriously, we are like the worst group of Talkers ever!” She laughed again. “What was Thamuz thinking when he chose us?”

Ben and Bethany laughed, but Zachary sat up straight. “He chose both of you too?”

“Yeah,” Bethany said between laughs.

“Of course,” Ben said, his humor waning. “He chose all of us. Why?”

“Did both of you know Thamuz before he chose you?” Zachary asked.

They both stopped laughing.

“Yeah,” Bethany said. “He chose me for thousands of missions.”

“What about you, Ben?” Zachary asked.

“Sure. At least a thousand times. Why?” Ben answered, his face tilted.

“I don’t know.” Zachary thought about it. “He must have chose us for some reason.”



14 *Surprise Visitor*

BETHANY PLACED A STACK OF PLATES IN THE CUPBOARD with a loud clank.

“Can’t you do that quieter,” Ben complained as he looked up from his stack of books spread out on the kitchen table.

Zachary smiled. The kitchen was his favorite spot in the house. He didn’t mind the noise. Why would he? This room contained most everything he’d come to appreciate in his first life. The light, the sounds, the smells, and the tastes were all things he would miss when he went back to his realm. He *did* want to go back. He looked forward to commanding legions and gaining the respect of the great demons again. But that didn’t mean he wouldn’t miss some things about this existence, like the feel of a brisk morning breeze, the sensation of a beating heart, or the feel of Emma’s hair brushing his shoulder.

“Then you do the dishes,” Bethany told Ben, motioning toward the dishwasher as if offering a prize.

“Not my turn,” Ben quipped as he shook his head.

“Then just deal,” Bethany said, clanging more pans together to make a show of her chore.

Ben stood, collected his mess of papers, and said, “I’ll do this in my room.”

“Whatever, horny boy,” Bethany teased.

Zachary smiled and looked down at his plate. Ben glowered at Bethany as he stuffed the books into his backpack and started to walk out. Then, the doorbell rang and the three of them froze.

William went into town for a business meeting, and Claire had begged to let her go with him. The human form William had embodied was a wealthy business owner. That explained the huge house. Although the company mostly ran itself, William had to make appearances every once in a while. Ben and Bethany didn’t know much about it, but as long as the money kept coming in, they didn’t really care.

The doorbell chimed again.

Bethany’s face transformed into a mischievous grin as she headed toward the door. “Maybe it’s the missionaries again.”

Ben grabbed her arm. “No, you don’t.”

Zachary stood and asked, “What about the missionaries?”

Bethany shook her head like it was nothing, and Ben explained, “Before you got here, a couple of guys rang the doorbell.”

“It was no big deal,” Bethany said, shrugging.

Zachary looked back at Ben.

Bethany gave Ben a harsh stare, and he went on, “She started flirting with them, and—”

“I told you it was nothing,” Bethany interrupted.

“Anyway,” Ben kept going, “when she started rubbing herself all over them, they freaked out and—”

“Yeah, yeah, they haven’t been back since. *Hello*. It was a joke,” Bethany said as she yanked her arm away from Ben’s grip and walked to the door.

As the bell chimed a third time, Bethany swung the door halfway open and said, "I knew you would be back for m..." She stopped mid sentence and sighed, "Oh. It's you," with a flat tone.

"Hello, Miss Sable," a voice outside said. "I apologize for the disappointment. I was hoping Mr. Sable was available."

"Who is it?" Ben asked, walking to the door.

"It's for you," Bethany said, looking at Zachary.

"Me?"

Bethany swung the door wide and stepped aside. It was Mr. White, his science teacher. Zachary tilted his head, wondering why his teacher would be at their door. He turned in all of his homework. He'd skipped a couple of classes, but that was weeks ago.

"Actually," Mr. White explained, "I was hoping to see William Sable. Zack told me I could meet with him."

"I did?" Zachary asked. Then, he remembered telling Mr. White he could when he was trying to follow Emma on his first day at school. He shrugged. "Oh, yeah. I guess I did."

"I've called his office several times," Mr. White continued. "I thought it would be better to just stop by." He stepped into the entry and looked around. "Is he here?"

"Um," Ben stammered. "We're not supposed to let strangers in—"

"Oh. It's fine," Mr. White said as he walked into the house, looking from side to side. "Zack and I know each other."

Bethany shrugged helplessly at Zachary. Ben shook his head like he didn't know what to do as the stranger invited himself in.

"He's actually not here right now," Zachary told the man, who was clearly not to be stopped.

Mr. White gave a tight smile. "Can you tell me when you expect him?"

“He had to go into town on business,” Bethany said behind him.

He turned and said, “That’s fine.” He walked toward the front sitting room and turned. “I’ll just wait here until he returns.” He turned, took a seat in a wingback chair, and began to fumble through the old magazines arranged on the coffee table for decoration.

Ben stood in the doorway and told the unwelcome guest, “He may be a while.”

When the man looked up, Zachary jumped. He didn’t see the face of the science teacher. He saw the contorted face of a battle-worn Whisperer. There was something familiar about this one. He couldn’t place it, but he felt like he had seen it before.

Zachary looked at Ben and Bethany, but they hadn’t reacted. He must be the only one to see it. He looked back, but the man’s face had returned. “I’ll wait. I’ll be fine. Thank you,” Mr. White told the trio and began perusing the old magazines.

Zachary waved Ben and Bethany into the kitchen. “Did you see that?”

“What?” they both said.

“I’ve seen him before,” Zachary tried to explain.

“No duh,” Bethany said. “He’s your science teacher.”

“Why is he here?” Ben asked.

“I know he’s my teacher,” Zachary said, rolling his eyes. “The Whisperer.”

“There’s a Whisperer with him?” Ben asked.

“The one you saw before?” Bethany asked Zachary.

A line formed between Ben’s eyes.

“The same one.” Zachary nodded. “But I think I’ve seen him somewhere else.”

Ben and Bethany looked at him silently.

“In the other realm,” Zachary said. “I think, anyway. I’m not totally sure.”

“What’s he doing here?” Bethany looked serious.

“I don’t know.” Zachary glanced into the room where Mr. White appeared to be having a conversation with himself.

“Who’s he talking to?” Ben asked.

“He’s a teacher,” Bethany mumbled. “They’re all kinda whacked.”

Soon, the garage door started rumbling. All three heads looked at each other then peered into the sitting room to see if Mr. White and whatever invisible guest he was talking to noticed the sound. He carried on the conversation, unaware William had arrived.

The trio looked at each other and quietly opened the garage door. They went through and closed it behind them.

Claire bounced out of her seat and onto the floor then started to say something when Bethany put her finger to her lips. Claire stopped and twisted her lips as she followed directions.

“What is it?” William asked quietly.

“It’s not my fault,” Bethany whispered.

“It’s mine,” Zachary admitted. “I know you said not to bring people here, but I accidentally invited—”

William shook his head. “We’re not ready to have Emma—”

“It’s not her. I forgot to tell you that I told Mr. White, my science teacher, he could meet with you.” Zachary paused.

“He’s here?” William asked.

“Sorry,” Zachary apologized.

“I’ll take care of it. You two,” he pointed to Ben and Bethany, “take Claire upstairs.” They nodded. “Make sure he doesn’t see her.”

Bethany took Claire’s hand as Ben opened the door to make sure Mr. White was still distracted. He motioned for them to come in, and they disappeared into the house.

“Did he say why he’s here?” William asked as he walked toward the door.

Zachary shook his head.

William opened the door. "I have a feeling I know why. I'll handle this. You go upstairs and make sure they don't come down."

William left through the outside door and walked to the front, making a show of coming in. Zachary walked up the stairs and paused halfway up as Mr. White stood and walked toward William.

"Mr. White," William said as he reached his hand out and shook the teacher's hand. "Zachary told me you wanted to meet. What can I do for you?"

Mr. White smiled tightly and glanced at Zachary. He looked back at William and asked, "Can we speak privately?"

"Absolutely," William told him as he eyed Zachary. He motioned toward the hall and said, "The study?"

The teacher nodded. They walked in and closed the french doors behind them.



*15 A Rainy Night*

ZACHARY STOOD SILENTLY IN THE ROOM. DESPITE THE midday sun attempting to peek through the wooden slats of the blinds, the book cases and pine walls seemed dark and oppressive. William paced in front of him. He knew William wanted an answer, but he'd been too distracted to listen. He knew he was in trouble and he shouldn't have left an open invitation to the nosy instructor, but he was trying to follow Emma. Wasn't that what he was supposed to do?

He watched the dust swirl in the streams of light, rousing a musty smell from the previous home owners. A few days earlier, he asked Bethany what the scent was. "Cigars," she told him, followed by pretending to put her finger down her throat with a gagging sound. "People are so disgusting. Seriously, why would anyone intentionally breathe in smoke?"

Zachary liked the smell. It made him feel comfortable. So much different than the sulfur and rotting flesh of his realm. He shook his head. Silently, he told himself to stop daydreaming and pay attention.

William stopped pacing. “Well?”

“Huh?”

“Were you even listening?”

“Yes. Of course, I was,” Zachary lied.

“Did he?” William’s face was stern.

Zachary shook his head, not sure what he was denying. It seemed like the right answer.

“You sure?” William asked as he raised an eyebrow.

“Definitely,” Zachary assured him, still not sure what the question was.

“Good,” William said. “Let’s make sure he doesn’t. You said you recognized him.”

“Mr. White?” Zachary asked.

William’s shoulders dropped as he sighed heavily. “The Whisperer,” he chided. “It’s important he didn’t see Claire. That was too close.”

Zachary nodded. He felt better knowing the questions were about her. Mr. White didn’t see Claire. He wondered why it mattered.

“Where’d you see him?” William asked.

“I’m not sure. Something about him seemed familiar.” Zachary wrinkled his brow, trying to remember. He’d seen so many Whispers since that first time in history class, not to mention the thousands he’s seen when he was a Whisperer.

“I recommended you for this task. Remember that, Zachary,” William said as he stared coldly.

Zachary looked into Williams eyes. He felt inadequate, so he avoided eye contact. Not long ago, he felt as if William had put his trust in him; now, he felt like a child being scolded. He glanced quickly around the room and focused on a photo frame that seemed out of place. It was of a woman with blonde hair that touched her shoulders. She looked younger than William. With his new eyes, he could see how pretty she was.

Zachary cocked his head and focused on the photo. "I haven't seen that before."

William walked to the desk. "It shouldn't be out." He picked it up and opened his drawer.

"Why? Who is it?" Zachary asked as he walked toward the desk.

"It's not your concern," William said. "Focus on your job." He slid the photo into the drawer and snapped it shut. He turned his attention back to Zachary. "No more surprise guests. Don't screw this up."

Zachary nodded and walked out.

William took a seat, sighed heavily, and slid the drawer open. He flipped the photo over and looked into the woman's eyes. Carefully placing it back on the desk, he aimed her smile toward him, then leaned back in his leather chair and studied the woman's face.

William closed his eyes and heard her voice.

\* \* \*

"It's the only way," she cried. Her tears mixed with the rain as she looked down at the little girl in her water-logged *Little Mermaid* hood.

"Sarah," William pleaded. "I won't let you. We'll figure something out." He held her hand and pulled it to his lips.

She wrapped her hand around the back of his neck, pressed herself into him, and kissed him deeply. Then, Sarah pulled away and looked into his eyes. "Promise me you'll keep her safe. Keep him away from her."

"You're staying with us. We'll do this together," William argued.

The girl whimpered, "Where's Mommy going?"

Sarah knelt on the ground, feeling the water soak through her dress. She didn't care. Getting wet was the least of her concerns. The shivering little girl was all that mattered now. She wouldn't let him find her.

Tears ran down her face. “Mommy’s gotta go for just a little while. Okay?”

“When will you be back?” the girl asked.

“Very soon, Sweetie. I promise,” Sarah told her as she kissed her cheek, tasting the salt of tears. She would miss that. Not the taste of sadness, but tastes in general. That, the cold, the smells, the warmth of a kiss, and the way a simple touch could change her mood.

“You don’t have to,” William said as he fell to his knees, feeling the sting of the cold through his slacks. He wrapped both of them in a hug.

Sarah knew if she didn’t do this now she never would. She had to be strong for William and for her little girl. She squeezed them both and breathed in the scent of soap and shampoo from the girl’s shoulder. That’s what she would miss the most. Hugging her little girl.

She stood then ran to the black Mercedes. She quickly opened the door and slammed it shut, locking herself in. She was the danger. She had to protect them. She had to remove herself from their lives.

For several seconds, she sat and stared at the wheel, trying to convince herself she could stay, that they wouldn’t be found, but it was no use.

The girl pounded on the car door. She couldn’t look or she would give in. She glanced toward the passenger side, and saw the reflection of the mermaid with small, wet fists pounding on the window. She focused on the rain, trying not to see the soaked hoody, little hands, or big brown eyes.

“Mommy!” the girl screamed.

William started to reach for the handle, but stopped himself. He knew she was right. They were too weak. They would be found. He couldn’t protect the child with Sarah there. He picked the girl up and held her to him while she continued crying out, “Mommy! Mommy! No!”

He marveled at Sarah's strength—a strength he knew he didn't have. He held the screaming child as he watched her drive into the darkness. Quietly, he said, "I promise, Sarah. I promise."

"Mommy! Please, don't leave me!" the girl's voice echoed into the darkness.



16 *Sunday Morning Breakfast*

AS ZACHARY STEPPED INTO THE KITCHEN, HE SHIELDED HIS eyes from the morning sun that reflected harshly off of every surface. You'd think a group of demons would have chosen a house more fitting, with dark floors, small windows, and black... everything. Not this group. Everything surrounding them had to be white or close to it.

"Finally, you're up, sleepyhead," Claire said as she rolled her eyes. "I made yours special today." She jumped up, rushed to his side, and grabbed his hand, dragging him to the table. "It's your Sunday treat." Zachary smiled as Claire pulled him down. When he sat, she climbed into the seat next to his and said, "I made all your favorites."

She pointed to each item on his plate, carefully explaining how she knew he liked them. "The first day you ate all of the french toast, so I didn't even get any. But that's okay." She shrugged. "I remembered how you mixed the eggs with the hash browns and scooped them up with the toast. You ate it so fast, remember?" Zachary nodded. "When you

bit the bacon, you closed your eyes like you were trying to make a memory. Oh, and I think you like both of them, so I gave you milk *and* orange juice.”

“You made all this for me?” Zachary asked.

Claire beamed and nodded.

“She made every bit of it herself,” William added.

Zachary looked at his odd family gathered in the brightly lit room then down at the little girl smiling next to him and asked, “Why?”

She slid off the chair and awkwardly reached her arm around his waist. “Because I love you, Zack.”

He wasn’t sure how to react, so he placed his hand on her back as she pulled herself into him. The fabric of the *Little Mermaid* nightgown was soft and thin. He could feel her fragile spine, the gentle definition of each rib, and the warmth of her body. An urge came over him as he felt her breath through his thin t-shirt. That’s the wrong word. More like a need. Still not right. A compulsion. That was it.

He was compelled to protect her. There was no reason for it. It would never gain him anything, but he had to keep her safe. No matter what.

Claire released him and demanded, “Now eat it.” She climbed into her chair and scooped a mouthful of runny eggs then licked at the gooey orange drips trying to escape her lips. He smiled at her and happily obliged.

After he finished the amazing meal, he gulped the remainder of the orange juice. He’d forgotten about the milk, so he took a huge swig and made a funny face.

Claire laughed and explained, “You should always drink the milk first *then* the orange juice.” She made the same face Zachary made and said, “I don’t know why, but it doesn’t work the other way.”

“How’d you get so smart?” Zachary asked. “Where have you been all my life?”

Claire looked up at him and said, "I've been here the whole time. Where were you?"

"She's gotcha there," Ben chimed in.

They all looked at each other when the doorbell rang. William glared at Zachary. He shrugged.

Claire bounced down from her chair and skipped toward the front door. "I don't know why you guys always freak out when the doorbell rings. It just means someone's at the door." She swung the door open and said, "Hi. I'm Claire." Before anyone could respond she continued, "I bet you're Emma. Zack told me you were pretty. He was right. You're *really* pretty."

William mouthed, "What's she doing here?" toward Zachary.

Emma crouched down and reached out her hand. Claire shook her hand, and Emma said, "It's nice to meet you, Claire. I love your PJs."

"Thank you. My mom likes *Little Mermaid*. Are you here for Zack?" Claire asked. When Emma nodded, Claire turned and called out, "Zack. It's for you."

Zachary hurried to the door and said, "Thanks, Claire."

As Emma stood, he worked his eyes down her body. Her hair was pulled into a tight ponytail exposing her smooth neck and shoulders. The flowered dress had thin straps holding the light fabric in place. It gently pulled in at her small waist and billowed out at the hips, stopping just above the knee. Then, her scent hit him, and he marveled at how clean and fresh it made her seem.

"Well," Emma said. "Are you gonna say 'hi?'"

He snapped to attention and asked, "What are you doing here? How'd you know where I live?"

Emma stiffened. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have. I'll go." She turned and took several steps.

"Emma. Wait," Zachary said as he walked onto the porch and closed the door behind him.

Emma turned. "I don't know what I was thinking. I'm sorry. I'll go."

Zachary walked toward her. "It's okay. I just didn't expect—"

"I know I shouldn't have looked up your address. I don't know what I'm doing anymore," she told him as she shook her head. "I mean, everything used to make sense. I had friends. People liked my dad. Then, my mom got sick, and everything changed. Then, you came, and I thought... Sorry to bother you." She turned and quickly walked away.

Zachary ran to her and held her arm. She stopped, and he could feel her crying. "It's okay, Emma. I like that you came."

She turned. "Are you sure?"

"Of course."

"I'm sorry I'm such a mess."

Zachary looked at her. "If this is a mess, I'd love to see... well... not a mess."

She smiled at him as she wiped a tear with her arm. "Wow." She sniffed. "You're quite the orator, Mr. Sable. You should consider debate team."

Zachary smiled. "So, now that we've established you're always welcome, why did you come see me?"

"Well," she wiped her other cheek. "Sorry. I was going to my dad's old church, and I thought maybe..."

"You want me to go to church with you?"

"It's okay if you don't want to."

Zachary tilted his head and thought about it. Church. Was it safe? He knew they couldn't see him, but what if the Selfish One, the Christ, was actually there? Not even a Talker could hide.

Bethany noticed his silence. "It was just an idea. It's something I do, you know, on Sundays."

"I'd love to," Zachary told her, reveling in the smile that followed. For some reason, her smile warmed him.

“You might wanna...” She pointed to his sweats and t-shirt.

“Oh, yeah. Give me a minute,” he told her before rushing into the house.

“What was that about?” Bethany asked as he hurried past.

“Nothing,” he said, flashing a mischievous smile and running up the stairs. “We’re going to church.”

“What?” Ben, Bethany, and William yelled simultaneously.

He quickly threw on some clothes and ran back down. Seeing the three of them in front of the door with their arms crossed, he stopped.

Claire looked hopefully at Zachary and William and asked, “Can we go too?”

William stared at Zachary. “This isn’t a good idea.”

“You told me to get to know her,” Zachary said. “Emma goes to church, so I go to church. Okay?” Zachary ignored the demon trio’s shaking heads and leaned down, kissed Claire on the head, and told her, “If this works out, maybe next time.” She smiled, and Zachary slipped out the door. He reached his hand out, and Emma slid hers into it as they walked toward an old pickup.

“Is this yours?” he asked.

“My dad’s. He doesn’t work on Sundays anymore, so he lets me take it.”

They got in and sat in the old truck. As they headed toward the center of town, Zachary couldn’t help wondering if he was making a fatal mistake.



*17 Sunday Sermon*

THE STREETS WERE LINED WITH CARS ALL HEADED THE same direction. People wearing orange vests were directing traffic, and groups of people were walking together. Most of the girls wore dresses, and the boys wore button-up shirts. Kids tagged along with the adults who greeted one another pleasantly.

All seemed normal except for the hundreds of Whisperers darting in and out of the realm. As Emma followed the vested men's directions and aimed her father's truck into the middle school parking lot across the street, Zachary checked out the white building. All his inhibitions dropped as he watched a demon dancing on the symbol of Lucifer's greatest victory and worst defeat.

The cross so prominently displayed held two meanings. The first was the victory over the Holy One, killing God Himself. The second was the pain of the Great One when he realized he had been manipulated into bringing about the means for mankind to be stolen from him. Lucifer swore we

would not be fooled again. The Last Day is coming soon, and we *will* be victorious.

Zachary felt safe. God certainly wouldn't be visiting this place.

"Ready?" Emma asked as she pulled the keys from the ignition and dropped them in a small bag. He could see a worn leather Bible with the words "Pastor Green" embossed on it in her bag. Most of the gold lettering had worn off. He shuddered slightly.

"Well?" she asked, looking at him. "Are we going in?"

"Yeah. Right," he said as he threw his door open. He ran around, catching her door before she managed to get it open. He pulled up on the handle. It didn't budge.

She shrugged and told him, "There's a trick to it. Here..." She threw her shoulder against the frame, and the door popped open. "She's a little stubborn sometimes." She stepped to the pavement and explained, "Dad says she reminds him of mom. I think that's why he keeps her."

"What happened? I mean, with your mom?"

"This is a good day," she told him. "Let's keep it that way. Okay?"

"Um, sure."

She reached her hand out. He looked around at several people who had taken notice of them then looked back at her. "What? Are you afraid?"

He pointed his chin behind her. "Why are they looking at me?"

"It's not you." She grabbed his hand. "It's me. Come on." She dragged him through the parking lot and across the street, straight toward the crowd. "This was my home before it was most of theirs. Hi, Sam. Hi, Liddy."

Samuel turned and said, "There you are." He glanced at Emma's hand and frowned when he found it entwined with Zack's. He looked up again and faked a smile. "I see you've brought young Zack. Isn't that nice, Liddy?"

Liddy mirrored Samuel's smile and said, "It's so nice to see you, Zack."

Zachary watched as several Whisperers surrounded the other members of the group. He couldn't make out all the words, but he could tell what they were telling the humans by the looks on their faces and the angry whispers. *Slut. It's good that her mother's not alive to see how horrible she turned out.*

Zachary stiffened and released her hand. The Whisperers dissipated, seeming proud of their accomplishment. Emma looked at Zachary.

She whispered, "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he hesitated. "It's just..."

"Don't worry about them," she told him as she slipped her hand back in his. "We'll see you inside, okay?" she told the group. She led him toward the large double doors with a sign that read, "Welcome to Inspiration Community Church."

They passed some kids from school as they walked. Several others said "good morning" to the couple, but Zachary sensed the real meanings. *Harlot. Prostitute. Thief. Disgrace.* His mind swam as he tried to comprehend the hatred these people had toward this young girl. Her grip tightened each time she passed one of them. He could tell she felt pain at their disdain.

As they walked through the entry, an older man and woman flanking the doors handed them a bundle of papers. Zachary inspected his, and Emma explained, "Bulletins." When Zachary tilted his head, she smiled. "Announcements, stuff about the service. Just hold on to it."

"Do you come every week?"

"Yep," she responded as she led him into the sanctuary and slid into a pew. She opened the bulletin and pulled out a half-sheet that read, "New building dedication. Join us in a night of prayer and celebration at the new site." She closed her eyes, leaned her head back, and sighed. That place was

her father's vision, not theirs. She tucked it away and slid her hand in Zachary's.

He whispered, "I don't think they like us."

She leaned toward him. "This is my house. They're not getting rid of me, no matter what they say my dad did. Besides, they're not that bad. They're really good people. They just don't know it."

"I don't think we're talking about the same people," Zachary replied.

The people filed in, filling most every spot except the row Emma Louise Green and Zachary Sable occupied. The rows immediately in front and behind them also remained empty, as if the young couple emitted some kind of contagion.

Zachary leaned and whispered, "You still think they're good?"

Emma stared in front of her and said, "I do."

Zachary sighed.

An older lady climbed onto the bench of an organ on the right side of the stage while another took a seat at the piano on the other side. The congregation quieted as a man walked to the podium and said, "All rise. Turn your hymnals to 142 as we praise our Lord by singing 'There is a Fountain Filled With Blood.'"

Emma reached for a book in front of her and nudged Zachary. He shrugged his shoulders. She wrinkled her forehead and asked, "Have you never been to church before?" He shook his head. She reached in front of him, handed him a book, and told him, "Stand up."

He stood and mumbled, "Page 142, right?"

She closed her book and held it in one hand, keeping a finger in the right spot. "*Hymn 142.*"

She helped him find the right page as the group of people sang. He looked around and caught several of the people glancing their way as they sang about blood washing

their sins away. The man at the podium swung his hand around strangely while he blared out the words.

The music leader called out several hymn numbers, and the group obediently followed. Zachary didn't keep up with the songs. Instead, he focused on the girl beside him. She flipped through the pages, but never once looked at the book for the words. She sang out strongly and beautifully, as if these songs meant everything to her.

"Our final song will be number 477," the song leader said. "Jesus' Hands Were Kind Hands. Can I get an 'amen?'" Several members cried out "amen," and the song began.

Zachary looked at Emma and noticed she wasn't singing. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

Zachary lifted an eyebrow. "Don't like the song?"

"It's fine." She shrugged as the group sang, following the man's hand gestures. He tilted his head, and she responded, "I know what's coming next."

The song finished. The leader motioned for the people to sit, and the crowd quietly complied as the two women and the man shuffled off stage. A door opened at the back of the stage, and a man walked to the front. All eyes were on the him as he took his place behind a podium. Zachary focused on the two small demons darting around his head.

Two demons? The man must be strong-willed. Either that or his original Whisperer lacked any kind of creativity and needed help. Zachary decided they must be lower forms. Any higher demon would never ask for help. He would rather fail than look for assistance.

"Friends," the man smiled. "Jesus' hands are kind hands. What does that mean?" Without waiting for a response, he went on, "Healing, saving, washing feet, and doing good. Not just to some, but to all." As one of the whisperers appeared on his shoulder, he asked, "Do you believe that?"

Zachary looked at Emma. He wasn't sure what her expression was. Was she sad or pained or completely blank? He watched as several Whisperers appeared alongside their humans, poised and ready for something.

“Our family, the entire community of Inspiration, is still healing after what many of you have described as a betrayal,” he explained. “Many of you have come to me this very week, still very much hurt by what occurred here. It had nearly torn the town of Inspiration asunder.” He laid his hands on the Bible and said, “Galatians, chapter 6 says, ‘Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.’ Matthew, chapter 18 tells us to go to the transgressor and confront him. If he doesn't listen, bring your brothers in Christ. Many of you have testified all righteous and biblical methods had been refused.”

Zachary looked down at Emma's hands as she balled her dress in tight fists. Her eyes glistened and her lips twitched. “Are you okay?”

She didn't respond.

“Chapter 3 of the book of Titus tells us, ‘As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him....’” He looked over the congregation and said, “Division is a terrible chapter in a congregation of believers. We must be strong, stand together, and rid this church, this community, and Inspiration of such a person. I believe the Bible is speaking directly to us. To this time.”

He motioned his arms in a wide circle. “Our town. Our community. Our family. The Bible itself is telling us to be strong. Be united. To be united in might and cleanse ourselves from the evil that has been brought upon us. To be restored to our former glory. To be restored to our former strength and community. We must stand together. Although some may be hurt, we must be strong and join together to heal

our hearts. To get back to the true work of the church. To bring the love of God. To let God bring joy and fulfillment to this family. Please understand. Until hatred and disgrace are removed from this place, God cannot bring his ultimate goal to you. God's very existence is to bring joy to your life. Are you ready for God to bring you joy?"

Zachary watched as the Whisperers prompted their humans to stand and shout "Amen." The demons victoriously danced on their shoulders as the pastor stood before the cheering mass raising his arms in triumph while Emma shrank in her seat.

Zachary leaned toward her and asked, "Are you okay?"

She looked at him with glassy eyes and stood, scooping her papers and small purse before stumbling over him to get to the aisle. He followed her as she ran to the huge wooden doors.

Zachary watched as several angry looks followed her. He paused when he saw Samuel and Liddy standing at the end of one of the pews. Neither were joining the cheers. The two shared a look of concern. Samuel started to say something, but Liddy stopped him with an elbow to the side. Zachary ran to catch up with Emma. Each step they took, the crowd seemed to shout louder until she pushed through the doors and ran across the street toward the middle school. Zachary caught a door before it closed and ran after her. The door slowly closed, silencing the cheers.



18 *The Drive Home*

“EMMA!” ZACHARY CALLED AS SHE REACHED THE OLD TRUCK.

She fumbled through her small purse, her body shaking. Her voice cracked as she cried, “Where are my damned keys?”

Zachary caught up with her and asked, “What was that about?”

Emma closed her bag and threw it to the ground. She turned her back to the truck, leaned on it, and slid to the pavement. As she buried her face in her hands, her chest heaved.

Zachary had only been around one crying girl in this life. That was Bethany, who happened to be a demon and knew she was being childish. He looked at the small bag. When she threw it, the key to the truck had fallen out of the opening. If the keys were the problem, he could help with that. If it was something else, he wasn’t sure he could. He may have to walk home.

He reached for the purse and picked it up, along with the scattered papers. He held the keys in one hand. "Found 'em."

Emma looked up and snatched the keys. She raked her arm across her face and stared at the ground while she ran her thumb over the shape of the old key.

"Soooo," he said, elongating the word. "Will we be sitting for a while?"

She looked up at him. "Yes, genius. We're going to be sitting for a while."

"Okay." He slowly sat next to her, holding her belongings.

She looked at him and reached out. She nodded toward the purse and he quickly put it in her hand. She eyed him and asked, "You have no idea what to say, do you?"

He shook his head. "Should I go?"

"Seriously?" she asked. "What is it about a crying girl sitting on the dirty pavement in a new dress against a filthy old truck that makes you think she wants to be alone?"

"I don't know? I just thought..."

"What? Tell me what you thought."

"I don't really know what's going on, and... you seem kind of upset and..."

"I seem *kind of* upset?"

He nodded.

"Let me guess. This is the first time you've seen a girl cry."

"No. I've..."

"Well, good for you," she told him. "Finally! The boy of firsts. Something you've done before." She waved her arms. "Tell me, *Mr. Experience*. Did you learn *anything*? Because you don't seem to be doing a very good job this time."

"It actually didn't go very well that time either." He raised his eyebrows.

The door to the church opened and people began filing out.

“Perfect,” Emma huffed. She stood quickly and tried to straighten her dress. “Great. I just got this for y... um... yesterday, and I already ruined it.” She turned away and tried to look at her back. “Did I get it dirty?” she asked.

He looked down her and said, “A little. It’s not bad.”

“Brush it off? I don’t want it to stain.” She looked expectantly over her shoulder. “Please?”

He looked at the way the thin fabric draped over her shape, and he gently swiped at her butt.

“Make sure it’s all off,” she pleaded.

He looked into her eyes. They glistened with salt and water. He felt a rush of heat through his entire being as he swiped his hand across her butt several more times. He thought he must be the worst person ever—which he probably was, being a demon and all—getting turned on when she needed help.

“Thank you,” she said as she handed him the keys. “I don’t feel like driving. Can you?”

He held the keys and looked at her with his mouth open.

“Let me guess.” She bit her lip. “You’ve never driven before.”

He shook his head.

“Figures.” She motioned to the passenger side and said, “We’ll fix that later.”

She swung the door open and climbed in. He ran around to the other side and jumped in as she threw the truck in reverse. She eyed the people walking into the street and left the parking lot on the opposite side, steering the truck away from town. “I didn’t mean anything by that. I don’t blame you if you don’t want to see me anymore.”

“What? Why?” Zachary asked.

She started tearing up again and told him, “I’m a mess. I’m sorry. I’ll just take you home.”

Zachary’s eyes traced her jawline and the pesky ebony trail of hair that continually refused to be held captive in the

tie. He loved the way her hand thoughtlessly tucked the lock behind her ear. The tears made her eyes shimmer and her cheeks flush a warm scarlet. He'd been watching people since creation, yet he had never really seen them.

The town was a blur through the window as he stared at this beautiful creature shifting gears and gripping the steering wheel. Occasionally, she rubbed her palm across her cheek as she drove through the empty streets. She kept saying she was a mess, but all he could see was the way the sun highlighted her skin and the delicate neckline that led his gaze down the soft curve of her back. Her arms were taut. He loved watching her muscles tense and relax with each movement as she navigated the roads.

He wasn't there when the Selfish One created His beloved creatures. None, not even Lucifer, the great one himself, were allowed. But he imagined Emma Louise Green was the perfection God intended for this world. How had he never seen humans like this before? Perfect and flawed, self-sufficient and yet infinitely dependent.

The truck bounced, and he looked through the windshield. He saw a familiar house at the end of the block. William's house. "What makes you think I wanna go home?" he asked.

She looked at him for the first time since leaving the school parking lot. "It's probably better anyway. I need to check on my dad. Sundays are hard for him." The brakes squealed as she maneuvered to the curb in front of the manicured lawn. She sat silently, stared through the windshield, and dropped her hands to her lap.

"We shouldn't see each other anymore. I thought I could do this, but I don't think I'm ready." She looked down at her hands as they pulled at the thin material. "Besides, I hear the way the girls talk about you."

Zachary pulled his eyebrows together. "What're you saying?"

She wouldn't look at him. "You'd be better off without me. I'm a mess, and—"

"Stop saying that, Emma."

"I'm just saying—"

"I don't want them," he said as he spun to face her.

"Celeste has pretty blonde hair, and Brooke can sing like—"

"Emma," Zachary interrupted. He reached out and gently touched her chin, caressing her skin and pulling her face toward his. Her eyes focused on a rip in the old bench seat. He gently nudged her chin up until her glistening eyes met his. "I like *you*," he softly told her.

"You don't have to try to make me feel better," she told him as she lifted her chin off of his hand and tried to look away.

He gently turned her face back toward him, "I'm not, Emma. You're the first human I've ever cared about."

She scrunched her face and said, "Human? That's the strangest thing anyone's ever said to me."

"Um," he stammered. "I meant—"

"You're so different, Zachary Sable. I think I know what you meant." She smiled and bit her lip as she focused on his mouth.

He watched her eyes drop to his mouth, and his breath quickened. "I know I shouldn't, but can I kiss you?" He focussed on her full lips.

Emma traced his arm, pulled his palm to her mouth, and gently kissed it. She smiled. The tear tracks on her face caught the light as she said, "If you'd like."

Zachary leaned closer, and she closed the gap, bringing their warm lips together. His body flushed, and his heart pounded. He felt her lips part slightly, and he shivered as her tongue slid across his upper lip. His tongue met hers and...

Something slammed against the door. They jumped and cracked their teeth together. Emma's hand flew to her mouth as she cried, "Ouch."

He held his mouth, and they looked at each other.

The door slammed again, and Claire asked, "Are you guys coming in now? You've been out here forever. What are you doing, anyway?"

"Sorry," Zachary said to Emma.

She laughed and said, "It's okay." She wiped both hands across her eyes and checked her face in the mirror. She grimaced and looked away.

Zachary looked at the window in the house and saw Bethany holding the drapes, watching them.

"Well," Claire said. "What's taking so long?"

Zachary looked at Emma. "We should probably go in."

Emma nodded. "She's insistent; isn't she?"

As Zachary opened the door, Claire crossed her arms and told him, "Beth said you wouldn't want to sit in an old truck all day."

"She did; did she?" Zachary glowered at the window, and Bethany let the drapes close.

Claire ran to Emma and grabbed her hand. "Come in, Emma. Do you want to see my room?"

Emma smiled at Zachary as Claire dragged her down the path. She looked at Claire and replied, "I was hoping you'd show me."



## *19 House Guest*

CLAIRE PULLED EMMA THROUGH THE OPEN DOOR TOWARD A huge staircase. William froze mid sip next to Ben at the breakfast bar. “Emma’s here!” Claire announced as she dragged Emma through the large foyer.

Emma looked around and saw Bethany next to the window with her arms crossed. “Hi,” Emma said with a smile. Bethany’s lips returned the smile, but the rest of her face didn’t share the emotion. Ben and William waved as Claire pulled Emma up the stairs.

Emma tried to take in the amazing details of the house as the little girl failed horribly in her tour guide duties. “This one’s mine,” Claire said, pulling Emma inside and releasing her grip. “Do you like it?”

The room was full of paintings, posters, and bedding covered in mermaids. Emma dropped to her knees on the soft carpet and smiled. “I love it, Claire.”

“Look at this!” Claire said, snatching a mermaid pillow off of her bed and holding it out.

"It's perfect. Can I call you Ariel?"

"No," Claire said as she wrapped her arms around it.  
"My mom's Ariel."

"Oh. Well who are you then?"

"Mom says I'm more like Scuttle."

"Scuttle? Are you a *crazy* bird?"

"No." Claire ran her hand over the image. "Scuttle's from the world above the sea. Mom said she's more like Ariel."

"Why's that?"

"She said," Claire put her finger on her chin and looked up, "she finally got to live in the real world. Like Ariel." Her eyes lit up. "She calls me Scuttle when we visit her. Her name is Sarah."

"What a pretty name. You get to visit her?"

Claire sucked in a breath and held her hand to her mouth. "Oops."

"What's wrong, Claire?"

"You can't tell anybody we visit her!" Her eyes were as big as pie plates. "Don't tell Uncle Will, please."

"It's okay. I won't say anything."

"You can't tell anyone. Uncle Will said the scary ones will come back. It has to be our secret. Okay?"

A crease formed between Emma's eyes and she shook her head. "I won't tell."

Claire narrowed her eyes. "I mean it, Emma. Not. Even. Zack." She popped her mouth open and suddenly changed the subject. "I have my own bathroom. Wanna see?"

Emma blanched. "Um, sure."

Claire bounced up and grabbed Emma's hand again.

William stared daggers at Zack. "We agreed no surprise guests."

Ben stood and whispered, "She's got archangels, Zack!"

“Chill, Ben,” Bethany said. “They don’t see us. Besides, it’s better to bring her in than let you make out in the street. Claire saw you.”

William drew a deep breath and glared at Zachary. “Remember your commission. Remember the risks.”

Zachary nodded.

“Well, she was going to be here sometime.” William looked between Ben and Bethany. “You two. Be good.”

Bethany shifted her weight and opened her mouth.

“I mean it, Beth,” William cut her off. “She’s important to all of us.” Bethany rolled her eyes, and William glared.

“Okay,” Bethany said. “I get it.”

They all looked at the stairs.

“And down here’s the kitchen that you probably saw earlier,” Claire said as she hopped down one stair at a time with Emma following her. “Can I show her your room, Uncle Will?” Claire looked at Emma. “It’s really cool. He’s got like a million books.”

Emma smiled. “I bet he does.” She looked at Zachary and back at Claire. “It sounds awesome, Claire.”

William stood, walked over to Claire, and picked her up. “How ‘bout we let Zack show Emma around?”

“Awe,” Claire moaned. “She’s my first friend to come over.”

“Don’t worry,” William responded. “She’ll visit again.”

Claire smiled. “Promise?”

Emma looked at Zachary. “Promise?”

Zachary nodded. “I promise, Claire. Emma’s gonna be here a lot.”

Emma smiled at Zachary. “Really?” Zachary nodded and pulled Emma close.

Bethany rolled her eyes. “Fantastic. One big screwed up family.”

Zachary slid his hand into Emma’s and said, “Come on. I’ll show you around.”

They walked toward the library and Emma said, "Claire showed me your room. You didn't tell me you're such a slob."

Zachary stared in front of him. "Awesome."

Emma placed her other hand over his, and he felt the warmth of her shoulder against him as they walked. "Don't worry," she breathed in his ear. "I think it's cute."

"Being a slob is cute?"

"Yeah."

"Why is messy cute?"

"It means you're not perfect."

"You have something against perfection?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Well... I guess I do," she said with a smirk.

"Why would anyone have a problem with perfection?"

She stopped and turned toward him, taking each of his hands in hers. "Hmm." She pulled her lips tight and wrinkled her forehead. "If you're not perfect"—she smiled and tilted her head—"then I don't have to be." She released one of his hands and pulled him forward. "Wow. This is beautiful," she said as she walked into the study.

"This is William's office," he said, as she dragged him to the desk. "So what you're saying is I've lowered the bar."

"Yeah." She smiled and picked up a picture frame.

"And that's... a good thing?"

She rolled her eyes. "You have no idea. Dating is exhausting, pretending to be good all the time." She pursed her lips. "With you, I don't have to pretend. You already know I'm messed up."

She studied the photo and said, "Claire's mom is so beautiful." She ran her finger over the woman's soft features. "She must be wonderful."

"I wouldn't know," Zachary said as he leaned in to see the photo. "Why do you think it's Claire's mom?"

"Duh. Claire's totally her Mini-Me." She looked at Zachary. "You don't know her?"

“She was already gone when I got here,” he told her as he took the frame and studied the photo. He didn’t notice it before, but the woman looked exactly like the little girl he was living with. The one whose angels were watching over a house full of demons.

“Too bad,” Emma said. “It’s never too late. I’m sure she’ll love you.”

It didn’t make sense to Zachary. Why would William keep a picture of Claire’s mother on his desk? Claire called him Uncle Will. Why *does* she live in his house? Clearly, he’s not her father, so why does William hide the photo?

“Hello,” Emma said, waving her hand in front of his face. “You okay?”

“Huh,” he said, looking up.

“I think I lost you for a minute.”

Zachary softened. “Sorry.”

“That’s the second time you said you were sorry in the last thirty seconds.” She smiled. “I’m the one who’s sorry. This is your family. I just barged in asking too many questions.” She took the picture frame out of his hands. After putting it on the desk, she reached for his hand and asked, “How about the rest of the tour?”

“Now that sounds like an idea.” As they left the room, he eyed the photograph over his shoulder. Walking down the hall, he realized he hadn’t seen the rest of his own house. Why would he? He’d only ever been in the bedrooms, William’s office, a couple of the bathrooms, the library, and the kitchen. Why would a house need any more rooms?

They walked into a large room adorned with wood accents, a counter with several bottles behind it, a large burgundy table sitting in the center, and two sets of glass french doors allowing a clear view of twin fountains spilling into a lap pool. “Here we have the....” He hesitated.

Emma laughed. “Billiard room?”

“Sure,” he said. “Of course. The billiard room.”

She stepped up to one of the doors and stared outside. “The pool is amazing.”

Zachary stood next to her. He didn’t know they had a pool. “Huh. It is pretty nice.”

They walked through another door into a round room with ornately adorned high back chairs and a chaise lounge encircling a dark wood table. “And this is the circley... um, big chair...”

“Colonel Mustard. With the rope.” She gestured around the room and said, “In the *conservatory*.”

He looked at her sideways.

“Oh, come on,” she said, squinting her eyes. “Don’t tell me you’ve never played *Clue*.”

He shook his head. “I’m not sure what—”

She crossed her arms. “Shocking.” She smiled and shook her head.

He shrugged.

Emma pressed her lips together. “You fascinate me, Zachary Sable.”

“You mean with my worldly experience?”

“More like the way you continue to lower the bar.” She winked. “Now let’s see the rest of this mansion.”

They walked through art filled hallways and several more useless rooms decorated more like a museum than a residence. At the end of one hallway, they found a dark room with heavy curtains. Zachary felt along the wall near the door for a light switch.

Emma reached for his hand and pulled him into the dimly lit room. He shivered when he felt her warm breath on his neck and her hands slipping around the small of his back. His breath caught as her lips traced his neck up to his jawline. His body flushed as he tilted his head down and their lips met with slow, gentle kisses.

She pressed into him. The pressure of her warm belly both thrilled him and filled him with doubt. What if she

felt him? What if his desires disgusted her? What would his dysfunctional family think when she stormed out of the house in a rage?

Emma pressed harder against him, and he felt the light switch on the wall dig into his back. He stifled a groan. She kissed more deeply, and he felt her tongue slip into his mouth, searching. His tongue met hers, and he marveled at the warm, sweet taste that was Emma Louise Green. As she searched his mouth, she rocked her hips against him, pushing hard against his body.

He jerked again as the light switch raked across his spine with every movement. Emma hummed softly into his mouth as she paused to breathe then continued to search out his tongue and rock herself against him. He felt her shift to the side, sliding her leg between his and forcing herself against his thigh.

He twitched again from the stabbing pain in his back. She pulled away and stared into his eyes. He relaxed and pushed himself off of the wall, thankful for the reprieve. She ran her hands up his sides and onto his arms before pulling his arms down and holding his hands.

His breath was heavy. He was almost relieved she stopped. There was no way he could have the strength to stop. He wanted her so bad. All he could think of was her perfect body veiled in the thin fabric. Perfection so close, but worlds away.

She led his hands behind to the small of her back. He marveled at the way her back curved as he pulled her into him. She looked into his eyes, gently pushing his hands lower until his palms spread out over her perfect butt. She squeezed her hands against his until he massaged her without prompting. Then, she wrapped him in her arms.

Her tongue found his again as he traced the gentle lines of her panties beneath the sundress. Her firm muscles tightened and relaxed as she pushed the switch deep into

his back. He tried to put the pain out of his mind. This was worth the worst kind of torture.

“What are you guys doing in the dark?” Claire asked as she walked through the door.

“Nothing,” Emma said, pushing away from Zachary and breathing heavily.

“We couldn’t find the light.” Zachary pushed off the wall.

“It’s right here,” Claire said as she switched it on.

Emma glanced down at Zachary’s jeans and her eyes widened. She stood in front of him. “Oh.” She laughed lightly. “I told you to check there.”

“Right,” Zachary said, looking around Emma. “You did. I should’ve checked. Did you need something, Claire?”

Claire’s lips formed a thin line, and she shook her head. “No. Beth said you might have gotten lost. She told me I should find you.”

“That Beth,” Zachary said. “She’s always looking out for us, isn’t she?”

Claire shrugged. “I guess so.”

“Go tell her we’re okay,” Emma said. “We’ll be right out.”

“Okay. Don’t take too long.”

“We won’t,” Zachary said.

Claire turned around and ran down the hall. They both burst out laughing.

“I should probably go anyways,” Emma said. “I need to check on my dad.”

“I can go with you.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Why,” Zachary asked as he pulled her to him. “You met my crazy family. I wanna meet yours.”

Emma kissed him then pulled away. She bit her lip and looked at him. “Not yet.” She furrowed her brow and added,

“I mean, I do want you to meet him, or him to meet you, but... just not yet. Okay?”

As they walked to the front door, Emma waved to everyone and said, “Thanks for having me over.”

“Anytime,” William said, raising his hand.

Zachary opened the door, and Emma walked out. After a couple steps, she paused then ran back to Zachary and asked, “You’re okay, right?”

“I’m great.”

“See you at lunch tomorrow?”

He gave her an easy smile. “Absolutely.”

She smiled back, gave him a quick kiss, and skipped down the walk to her truck. Zachary stood in a daze as he watched her get into the old truck and fire it up. She gave a quick wave then drove off.

He stood at the door for several seconds until Claire said, “Do you love her, Zack?” He looked down at the little girl smiling up at him. “I think *I* love her,” Claire said as she put her small hand in his.

Zachary’s smile faded as William’s voice rang out. “Do we need to talk?”

His eyes dropped, and his face hardened as he remembered the photo. He spun and narrowed his eyes at William. “Yeah. We *do* need to talk.”



20 *The Woman in the Photo*

“YOU. ME. NOW,” ZACHARY ORDERED AS HE WALKED TOWARDS William’s office.

William took a step back and stared at Zachary, who didn’t bother to look if anyone was following him into the study. William looked at Bethany and Ben who shared a wide-eyed expression. He took a breath then followed Zachary into his office.

“I’m not missing this,” Ben said as he jumped to his feet and hurried to the hall. Bethany was right on his tail as the two of them met Zachary’s stiff arm at the doorway.

“Not now,” Zachary told the two and shut the door. He turned toward William.

“What’s the meaning of this?” William demanded.

“It’s time for some answers,” Zachary stated.

“Let’s get something straight, Zack. This is my house, and you—”

“Let’s get *this* straight,” Zachary commanded as he walked to the desk and snatched the photo of Claire’s mother.

William stiffened.

“Wanna tell me why you keep this?” Zachary asked, turning the image toward William. “It’s Claire’s mother, isn’t it? Who is she, William? And who the hell is Claire to you?”

William snatched the photo from Zack’s hand and quickly stuffed it in a drawer. “This is none of your business, Zack. *She* is none of your business.”

“No, you don’t, William.” Zachary placed both hands on the desk and leaned in. “You brought me into this house. You chose me.”

William stuck his finger in Zachary’s face. “You remember that, Zack. I chose you, and I can end your commission. Is that what you want?”

Zachary jerked upright. William did have the power to end it. That didn’t mean he could keep secrets, did it? Especially if they put him and everyone in the house in danger. “Is that what *you* want?” Zachary spat. “Go ahead! Do it! End my commission.” He crossed his arms and stared at William. “Zagan would love that. Your hand-picked warrior failing the commission. Where does that leave you?”

Bethany nudged Ben, and he pulled his ear from the door.

“What’s he saying?” Bethany asked.

“They’re yelling something about ending commissions. Shhh. I’m trying to listen.” He put his ear to the door.

“Are they talking about us? Move over,” Bethany said as she pushed Ben to the side.

“What’s a commission?” Claire asked from the end of the hallway.

Ben stumbled and crawled under Bethany to listen. “It’s something older people do. Like a job.”

“I wanna hear too,” Claire said, and Ben waved her over. She fit perfectly under him. As she put her ear to the solid wood door, Claire smiled.

“Who is she?” Zachary motioned toward the closed drawer.

William stood straight and took a deep breath.

Zachary lowered his tone. “Are we in danger?”

William sat in his chair and clasped his hands on the desk. “Not if they don’t find out.”

“Who?”

William motioned for Zachary to sit in one of the wingback chairs. Zachary looked sideways at William, then consented and took a seat. William opened the drawer and took the photo out, pausing to look at it before placing it back on the desk. “Her name is Sarah. And yes, she’s Claire’s mother. Her real name is Naamah.”

“The afflicter of children,” Zachary breathed.

“Yes. We were commissioned nearly two years ago.”

“And Claire?”

William leaned back in his chair. “Zagan chose the bodies. William Sable, a wealthy businessman, and Sarah Copper, his personal assistant. Since they worked together, they were the perfect team to begin a new house.” William leaned forward and propped his elbows on the table. He rested his chin in his hands and added, “Zagan failed to mention Sarah had a daughter.”

“Claire.”

“Yes.” William nodded. “Claire. Seemed easy enough. She was too young to take on an embodiment, so we’d just have to figure out how to get rid of her.”

“You’d just kill her?”

“Why not? It’s not like Naamah had an issue with destroying children. She hated them. This one was no exception with her hideously large eyes, frail little body, and that awful thick hair she couldn’t keep out of her face. We just needed a plan to avoid being thrown in prison.”

“Not the best way to live out a commission,” Zachary said.

“You’d be surprised how often it happens. Right now, there are thousands of embodied souls living in prisons,” William said with cold eyes. “Sarah was nearly one of them.”

Zachary’s eyes widened.

William leaned toward Zachary. “They told you of the importance of obeying human laws?”

Zachary nodded. “What happened to Sarah? Is she...”

“That’s not important,” William said, leaning back. “The important thing is Claire stays. She remains human, and we keep her safe.”

Claire pulled away from the door and whispered, “Hey. I think they said my name.”

“Quiet,” Ben told her. “I can’t make out what they’re talking about.” He nudged Bethany. “Get off. You don’t have to be on top of me.”

“You move,” Bethany whispered, giving Ben a shove.

“Hey,” Claire said.

Suddenly, the door gave, and all three spilled through at William’s feet. He scowled and released the handle. He looked at Zachary and said, “Keep her safe.” Then, he stepped around the pile of bodies and walked out.

They all stood. Bethany straightened her clothes.

Zachary rolled his eyes, buried his face in his hands, and said, “Seriously?” He lifted his eyes and focused a deadpan expression on Bethany.

“What?” Bethany responded. Zachary’s face was frozen. She crossed her arms and said, “You were being all super secretive. You can’t expect us to just sit out there when something serious is going on.”

They heard the garage door slam and the SUV roar to life.

“So,” Ben said as his eyes flitted between Bethany and Zachary. “What were you talking about?”

“You were taking about me, right?” Claire said as she ran and jumped into William’s chair.

Zachary watched the young girl slip out of the chair, push it closer to the desk, then climb back in.

“Are we fired?” Ben looked at Claire and back to Zachary. Zachary spun toward Ben. “What?”

Bethany slumped. When he didn’t answer, she threw her hands up and said, “That’s perfect. Just perfect. I didn’t even *do* anything.” She walked to Zachary and shoved her finger in his face. “I swear to”—she hesitated and looked at Claire’s round eyes—“whoever, if I still have a body when we get back, I’ll make you wish the Selfish One never created you.”

Ben stepped toward them. “We can lose our...?”

“Calm down,” Zachary said as he slapped Bethany’s hand away. “We’re not”—he glanced at Claire—“fired.”

“We were talking about...” he nodded his head toward the desk.

“Claire?” Ben said.

Zachary scowled.

Bethany clamped her mouth shut and through gritted teeth growled, “Ben.”

“I knew you were talking about me,” Claire said as she picked up the photo of her mother. “I heard you say my name. I like people to talk about me.” She traced her finger over the nose on the woman’s face.

“You do?” Ben asked.

“Of course, silly,” Claire answered, replacing the photo, perfectly fitting it into a space void of dust. “Everyone likes to be talked about.”

Zachary leaned back and looked at the little girl. She had no idea how much danger she was in. Or how dangerous she was.

“I’m hungry,” Claire said as she jumped to the floor. “Is it dinner time yet?” She ran to Zachary, climbed into his lap, and squeezed his neck.

Zachary faked a choking sound and asked, “What was that for?”

She sat up with her knees on his lap and looked in his eyes. “Because I love you.” He looked up at Ben and Bethany then back to the girl. She squeezed his neck again and spun around to sit on his lap. She looked up at Bethany and pleaded, “Can you make something?”

Bethany blanched. “I can’t cook.”

“You make breakfast,” Claire told her.

Ben and Zachary smiled.

Bethany shook her head. “That’s not dinner, silly.”

“I like breakfast.” Claire smiled and settled into Zachary’s lap.

“I’m up for it,” Ben said.

“Me too,” Zachary added.

Bethany put her hands on her hips and rested on one leg. She looked at Claire giving her a cheesy smile and said, “Fine. I’ll make something.”

“Yay!” Claire said, raising her arms.

Bethany huffed and pointed her finger between the two boys. “You’re helping.”

“Yeah. Come on,” Claire said as she jumped down and grabbed each of their hands. “We’ll all help.”



*21 Peeping Tom*

ZACHARY RAN THE TOOTHBRUSH UNDER THE STREAM OF water and placed it back in the plastic cup. He reached for the hand towel then raked it across his face before dropping it on the counter. As he stared at himself in the mirror, he realized he'd grown used to the face that stared back.

He looked at the toothbrush, the t-shirt he was wearing, the comb in the open drawer, the towel, the contents in the medicine cabinet, the lights, the tub, the shower, the toilet. Everything had a purpose. He needed things. His body required care and attention to function.

Since making his eternal choice before the invention of time, he relied only on himself. He had no use for anything other than the will of his lord. Looking around this brightly lit room filled with products and trinkets his new body required, he felt shamed. Weak. How had he let himself become so pathetic? All of this had no meaning in the eternal.

He shut the drawer, closed the cabinet, and switched the light off, plunging the room into a darkness that matched his empty feeling. He trudged down the hallway.

Ben looked up. "Hey. You okay?"

Zachary stopped for two beats, looked, and shrugged. He took another step.

Ben jumped up and walked to his open door. "You look different. What's up?"

"Nothing. I'm fine."

"You're not fine." Ben grabbed Zachary's arm, pulled him into his room, and shut the door. "Something's wrong. Spill it."

"Really. It's nothing," Zachary said as he leaned against the wall and studied a poster of a dark-haired girl standing with her legs crossed and her hands over her bare chest.

"I know," Ben said. "She's hot, right?"

"Who?"

"KP," Ben said as shook his head.

"KP?"

Ben shook his head again. "She's a singer."

"Oh," Zachary looked around the room and noticed most of the images were of the same girl. "Is she any good?"

"Who cares," Ben said with a laugh. "She's DDG."

"Huh?"

"Drop. Dead. Gorgeous." Ben laced his fingers behind his head. "You really need to get out more." He lifted his chin. "What's up with you? You seem different."

Zachary walked to the desk by the window and picked up a small object with two narrowing cylinders with glass on either side.

Ben jumped up. "Sorry. Those go in here." He took the object and stuffed it into a drawer as he glanced at the large house across the street. Zachary followed Ben's gaze and noticed movement in one of the windows. Ben's face was ominously serious. "Don't tell Beth, Zack."

Zachary noticed Ben's eyes wander to the house set far from the street. Zachary narrowed his eyes at Ben.

"Please, Zack," Ben pleaded. "If Beth finds out, I'll never hear the end of it."

"Are you spying on a girl?"

"No. Well, not really. I mean..."

"You're watching a girl through her bedroom window, and that's *not* spying?"

"No."

Zachary slid the drawer open and grabbed the object. He held the large openings to his eyes and pulled it away.

"The other way," Ben said as he took the object, spun it around, and pointed Zachary toward the house. "It's Anne Carmine. There, in the top window on the left."

Zachary squinted as he tried to make out an image. "I can't—"

"Here," Ben said as he snatched the object and held it up to his eyes, manipulating something between the cylinders. "They're binoculars. I'll get 'em focused. There." Ben handed them back.

Zachary held them up and aimed toward the top left window. In the yellow glow, he saw a young, blonde girl sitting in front of a mirror, brushing her hair. She had smooth skin, soft features, and full lips. The girl glanced toward Zachary. He sucked in a breath and dropped the binoculars.

"What the hell?" Ben said as he picked them up. "You could've broke 'em."

"I think she caught me."

"She didn't catch you," Ben said as he held the binoculars up. "Here. Look."

Zachary took them and focused on the window. The girl was smiling and holding a piece of paper. On it, he read, "Half hour. The tree."

“I told you. I’m not spying.” Ben got up, flashed his bedroom light several times, and put the binoculars in the drawer. “I have to go soon. You can’t tell anyone, Zack.”

Zachary stared for several seconds. “You have a girlfriend?”

“No,” Ben said. “Not yet, anyway.” Ben looked at the floor and kicked a sock he’d left out. “She’s pretty though, right?”

Zachary slid the drawer open, grabbed the binoculars, and looked toward the window. The girl was young. She looked toward Zachary. He kept his focus and noted her large eyes. She smiled, waved, and stood leaning into the window. Zachary looked over her thin body and slender arms. Her belly was exposed under the short top that draped loosely over petite breasts. She was too young to see her as anything other than a cute kid, but Ben seemed infatuated. Zachary put the binoculars down and nodded. “I guess she’s cute.”

“Oh, god. I know,” Ben said as he snatched the binoculars and stared at the girl across the street. “She drives me crazy. I can’t stop thinking about her.”

“She seems to like you,” Zachary said. “You shouldn’t encourage her since—”

“Yeah. I know,” Ben responded in a low voice. “Not like it matters. She’s going out with Ash Gray.”

“Ash Gray?”

“I know.” Ben rolled his eyes. “Stupid jock with a stupid name. It’s actually Ashton, but she calls him Ash. Her dad thinks he’s so cool. Like it’s a big deal being on the middle school football team.” Ben’s voice grew deep. “Great. He’s there again.”

“The jock?”

“No, her ass of a dad. Look at this jerk.” Ben handed the binoculars back to Zachary.

Zachary saw a large man standing in the girl’s doorway, violently jabbing his finger at her. His face was round with

venomous eyes. A demon swirled around him, darting from ear to ear, encouraging him. The young girl shrank with every stab until the man withdrew and slammed the door. She stood and ran out of the window's view. The warm light extinguished, filling the room with the darkness that surrounded the town.

"What's his problem?" Zachary asked as he slid the binoculars into the drawer and gently closed it.

"I don't know." Ben furrowed his brow. "She says he used be nice, but now, he spends all his time at the church. He comes home and yells about everything. At church, he's like a different person, all high and mighty, pretending to be perfect. But at home, he's just mad. Her mom, too. Anne said she thinks they're giving all their money to the pastor, so they're always broke now." Ben shook his head. "Sorry. I didn't mean to change the subject. What's wrong with you?"

Zachary sat down and thought about it. What was wrong with him? He'd become so dependent on... *everything*. He looked at Ben and asked, "Do you ever think about..."

Ben put his finger up and sat straight, looking past him. Zachary spun around and saw the bedroom light across the street flash a couple of times. Ben got up and grabbed the jacket draped across the back of the chair Zachary was sitting in. "Can we talk about it later?" Zachary's mouth hung open, but Ben said, "Sorry. I gotta go now. I wanna talk, but it's Anne." Ben left Zachary staring at an empty doorway.

Zachary sighed and stood. Ben had a girlfriend? He knew Bethany had boyfriend drama, but Ben was only fourteen. What happened to them? He didn't know about Ben, but Bethany and him were great creatures in their realm. Was William the only one who hadn't become so dependent on the things of this world?

He shook his head and walked into the hallway muttering, "Keep it together, Zack. Focus on your mission."

“Talking to yourself?” Bethany asked. He looked up to see her with an arched eyebrow. “Not a good sign.” She smiled and walked toward her room swinging her hips.

He couldn’t help noticing the shimmering material clinging to her hips just shy of her matching panties. She glanced over her shoulder and winked. He scanned her graceful neckline and followed the thin straps that strained against firm nipples atop full breasts as she disappeared into her room, leaving her door slightly ajar.

He felt himself stiffen. The sight of her made his mouth water. Maybe Bethany was right. He had to be strong around Emma Louise Green. Going too far with Emma would lead to discovery and separation from his bodies, both human and spiritual. Bethany was a different story. Who would know? They weren’t seen by angels or demons. She wasn’t Emma, but she was here.

He needed this. They both did. Maybe Bethany and him were here to help each other. Why else would William put them in the same house?

Zachary nodded his head. “Why not?” He took four quick steps toward her room. He stopped at the doorway and slowly pushed the door open. Bethany lay on the bed with several lavender pillows propping her up.

She bit her lip and smiled. “Can I do something for you, Zack?”

She had one knee bent, displaying her inner thigh. His attention focused on the soft skin where her thigh met the frills of her panties. He was keenly aware of his jeans. “Are you sure it’s safe?”

“I won’t say anything if you don’t.” She rolled onto her side and propped her head on her palm.

“Neither of us can,” Zachary said as he looked into her eyes, knowing they had made a solemn promise.

A hand clamped down on his shoulder and pulled Zachary back.

“You two need to get some sleep. In your own rooms.” William squeezed Zachary’s shoulder.

Zachary turned slightly away from William, causing Bethany to smile.

William glared at Bethany. “I’ll drop you and Ben at school early. Zack and I have to do something.” William looked at Zachary. “You okay missing a couple of classes?”

Zachary pulled his eyebrows together. “Sure, I guess. As long as I’m back by sixth period.”

“We can do that.” William looked back at Ben’s room. “I’ll let Ben know he needs to get up early.” William patted Zachary’s back and took a step toward Ben’s room.

Zachary let out a breath, not realizing he’d forgotten to breathe. Bethany looked at Zachary’s jeans, raised her finger, then let it drop. He gritted his teeth. “Shut up.” He sucked in a breath as he realized Ben was with Anne Carmine. “Um, William?”

William stopped. “You need something?”

“Ben’s already asleep,” Zachary said. “I’ll make sure he gets up early.”

William smiled. “Thanks. We’ll let him sleep then. You’re a good man, Zack.” William headed toward the stairs.

Bethany looked at Zachary. “Didn’t want William to catch him?”

“You know?”

“Of course I do,” Bethany said.

“You just let him do it?”

“What do I care if he gets off watching the little neighbor girl?” Bethany shrugged. “He’s a perv. All boys are. But I’ll never walk in on him again. It probably freaked me out more than him. Besides, it’s not like he’ll ever have the guts to talk to her.” She patted the bed. “You coming in or what?”

He followed her amazing curves and perfect skin. If William had been a few minutes later, who knows what he

would have walked in on? He gulped. He wanted to go in. “I better go to bed.”

Zachary watched her mouth drop open, and he quickly walked to his room and shut and locked his door behind him. He threw his shirt and pants on the ground then laid on his back. Cursing his weakness, he thought of Emma. He had to find out how William had become so strong.

Bethany threw herself back on her bed and pulled a pillow over her head. She kicked her feet and silently screamed. Why was it so hard for her to tempt this guy? Men were easy. She was Rimmon! He was obviously hard. They’re supposed to only want one thing. Her! Why was he being so difficult? Why was it so easy for Emma Louise Green to make him give in? Seeing him kiss that human girl made a pit form in her gut.



*22 Fear and Doubt*

TIAMANICUS WOKE TO THE STENCH OF SULFUR. HE TRIED to stand straight, but his face twisted with pain. He looked around the near colorless realm and realized he was surrounded by Zagan and some lesser demons. He raised his hand and looked at the celestial steel blade he'd carried since before time was created. For the first time, this realm felt oddly foreign.

Zagan stood before him speaking in the ancient language. Tiamanicus stared at him until the words made sense. Zagan was congratulating him. "Your work has proven itself. Rimmon's legion is making headway."

Rimmon's legion? Headway? Was Emma falling?

Zagan spun to the other demons. "Tiamanicus the Deceiver will lead us to another victory."

The demons screeched and hailed Zagan. Tiamanicus felt pride and a grin crept across his face. Zagan was proud. He sucked in a breath, flaring his nostrils, and drew comfort in the smell. As Zagan looked at him, Tiamanicus realized

he had done something terribly human. He breathed. Not to speak, just to breathe. He hadn't thought about it before, but demons do breathe. Just not for survival like the lower creatures. He watched Zagan's chest gently rise and fall as he spoke, then remain motionless while silent.

Demons were created different, better. Pushing celestial gasses across their vocals cords in either direction will resonate sound. Speaking was efficient. His human body limited him.

"Leave us!" Zagan snarled. At his command, the demons vaporized, leaving dust trails rushing to fill the empty voids. Zagan turned to Tiamanicus. "I trust this mission has not compromised your resolve."

"Not at all, my lord." Tiamanicus bowed. He hid his shame and weakness. "The human's are weak, pitiful creatures. You shall have your victory."

Zagan smiled broadly. "Very good, my trusted one. For this great deed, you shall have your reward."

Zagan began to limp and Tiamanicus followed. He wondered how many battles the great demon had won to be awarded such an honor as to lead countless legions, to be put over the great Thamuz, who has the ear of the Great One himself.

"Tell me, deceiver," Zagan hissed staring ahead. "How is the house of Thamuz? All members are doing well, I trust?"

Tiamanicus wondered at the question. "The house is well, Great One."

Zagan nodded. "Good. Good. Naamah and Thamuz are good leaders."

Tiamanicus thought of the photo on William's desk. Zagan didn't know Sarah was no longer at the house. "They are, my lord."

"Very well," Zagan said as he continued to limp forward. "And the child?"

Tiamanicus thought of Claire. Zagan was searching for something. The questions brought an uneasiness. William

spoke of Claire's importance. Where was Naamah? Wouldn't Zagan know if she had been vanquished?

"Child?" Tiamanicus asked.

Zagan stopped and smiled. "There is no child in the house?"

"None to my knowledge," Tiamanicus responded as he searched the hideous face for answers.

Zagan turned and began limping forward. "I must inquire as to how the task was handled without detection."

"I know nothing of such things," Tiamanicus responded. He followed Zagan's path.

Zagan stepped onto a stone leading to a large chasm. In the distance, a great battle raged. Demons swirled around lights brighter than the sun, reminding him of insects darting around streetlights illuminating the darkness. "Look," he said as he waved his twisted arm over the expanse. "A great victory is at hand. Gaze upon your work."

Tiamanicus filled his chest with sulfur and smoke and stood as straight as he could manage. He marveled at the hordes of lower demons swarming the land. He'd become weak during his time of embodiment. He swore to remember this moment of pride, of acknowledgement, of honor.

Zagan stared at Tiamanicus. The demon Thamuz had spoken so highly of appeared to be taking human traits. He took his eyes off the undeserving Talker and looked over the great chasm. "Come," he hissed.

"My lord?" Tiamanicus asked.

Zagan's face contorted and his decayed teeth dripped, revealing a twisted smile. "Your work." The force of the great demon's thoughts whisked them to a sidewalk on a street Tiamanicus recognized. The two stood outside Emma's house. Above several lower forms circled a pair of hideously bright lights, darting back and forth quicker than his eyes could follow. Zagan eyed the Talker gazing at the struggle. "Would you like to see more?"

Tiamanicus looked at Zagan. "What of the battle?"

Zagan smiled. "It is of no consequence." He raised his hand, and a legion of demons appeared before the bright lights.

Tiamanicus was again pulled with the force of Zagan's thoughts. They stood in a small room lit by a computer screen. Shadows danced on the walls as a girl moved her fingers over the touchpad of the laptop. The celestial lights brightened as a battle raged above. Tiamanicus hunched to avoid detection.

Zagan snarled. "Stand and see your work."

"The angels, my lord."

"My legions will occupy them," Zagan whispered.

Tiamanicus watched the great demon's eyes flick toward the battle. He sensed fear in the gesture. He could tell Zagan was not as confident as he wanted Tiamanicus to believe. This was dangerous. "What are you showing me, Master?"

Zagan walked toward the heavily protected girl. "Doubt," he hissed. "See for yourself."

Tiamanicus glanced above. The celestial lights dimmed as the angels engaged the legions. He walked toward her. Her face appeared cloudy through his real eyes. Her nearly black eyes glistened. He glanced above again and moved closer. The light of the screen brightened as she navigated the pages. The light caught her eyes and they flashed with a warm color. He gasped and studied her. Was she crying?

"Father," she looked up with tears streaming down her face. "Are You even there? I trusted You." She slammed the screen, throwing the room into near darkness, and her chest heaved. She raised her head and rubbed her face. "I don't even know why I talk to You. You've never listened!" She sat up and stared out her window, crossing her arms over her chest. "Daddy told me You would take care of us. 'The truth will come out. We'll be fine,' he said. Yeah, well he lied. We're not fine. Is this the truth? Were they right all along?"

She looked up, completely unaware as the battle raged overhead. "My whole life he taught me to trust You." She shook her head and whispered, "And I did. Even after You took my mom." She swept a pile of papers off her small desk. He watched as they floated to the floor. She crossed her arms over the laptop and dropped her head into her arms. "I miss you so much, Mom." Her back swelled as she sniffed without rising. "You'd know what to do."

Tiamanicus stood behind her as she said, "I don't blame him." She cried into her arms. "He loved you so much, Momma." The celestial light brightened, casting light over her thick hair. Without thought, Tiamanicus' hand reached to stroke her hair. As he felt his body forced back to Zagan's throne room, he dropped his hand.

Zagan sat on his heavily adorned throne. "Continue to prove your worth, Tiamanicus, and I will assure your position in my advancement."

"Thamuz will speak highly of your leadership, great Zagan." Tiamanicus bowed.

Zagan waved his hand. "Praise from Thamuz won't be necessary." Zagan's eyes focused on Tiamanicus. "Be sure of where your allegiances lie."

Tiamanicus nodded his head. "Be assured you have mine."

"Very well," Zagan hissed as he raised his hand to dismiss Tiamanicus.

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Zachary's eyes snapped open. He put his hand on his chest and felt his heart beat as he studied the shadows of the tree limbs on the ceiling cast from the streetlight below. He swallowed and sucked in a deep breath.

A voice quietly said, "I didn't need his help."

Zachary sat up and searched the darkness. He made out a shape in the corner.

"I was doing fine," Bethany said.

Zachary sighed and fell back to his bed. “What are you doing in here?” He turned his head and focused on her. She was dressed the same as earlier except for her expression.

She stood, holding her arms firmly across her chest. “He may question my methods, but my legion *is* making progress.”

“What are you talking about?”

Bethany jabbed her finger in Zachary’s face. “He promised me!” she hissed. “Tell him to stay out of my way!”

Zachary pulled his eyebrows together. “Zagan?”

“Yes, you idiot! I don’t trust him,” she said as her finger lingered over his nose.

“Well,” Zachary started. “He is a demon. We’re not exactly know for...”

Bethany’s face softened as she moved her finger, tracing Zachary’s chin then brushing her thumb across his lips. She stiffened and stood. “He stays out of my way if I have to go to the Great One himself.” She stared at him for several seconds then turned and walked toward the door.

Zachary leaned on his elbow and focused on her perfect butt until she turned the corner. He dropped to the pillow and sighed, “What is going on with everyone?”

He looked at the window above his head. Remembering the way the sun blinded him each morning, he stood and closed the blinds. The crazy girl left his door open so he walked across the room to close it. As he stood, grasping the knob, he looked down the hall and saw Bethany standing in her doorway looking at him. She smirked, then spun toward her room and shut the door. Zachary shook his head and laid down, determined to sleep past sunrise.



23 *Secrets and Promises*

ZACHARY WOKE TO A SQUEAK IN THE HALLWAY. HE ROLLED to his back and threw his arm over his face. The light was trying to sneak through the blinds he'd finally remembered to shut before falling asleep, but it was still dark enough so he lowered his arm and stared at the ceiling.

"Go back to sleep, Zack," he told himself as he shut his eyes, but he heard a door lightly snap shut. Ben's room. He forgot to tell him to get ready early. Zachary sat up, pulled his jeans on, and jumped up. He opened his door and looked down at Bethany's. It was still shut. Quietly, he slipped down the hall, opened Ben's door, and stopped.

Ben swung around and whispered, "What're you doing?"

Zachary stepped inside, shutting the door behind him. He looked sideways, noticing Ben was wearing yesterday's clothes. "Did you just get in?"

Ben plopped on his bed, kicked his shoes off, and smiled. "Yeah. You can't tell anyone." He pulled his socks off and whipped his shirt over his head.

“Were you with—”

“Anne,” Ben answered as he walked to his dresser and pulled a clean shirt over his head. He grabbed a pair of socks and shoes then sat. He slipped one shoe on and smiled. “I kissed her, Zack.”

“You what?”

“I mean... she kissed me.” Ben slipped the other shoe on and looked up. “I didn’t know she was gonna do it. I turned my head, and bam!” Ben smacked his forehead. “She was right there. Our teeth hit.”

Zachary cringed.

“Not my best move. It made her laugh though. She said she was sorry and we could try again. You didn’t tell me how awesome it is.” Ben flopped on his bed, leaving his feet on the floor. “She smells so good. And the taste. God, the taste.” Ben gulped. “I can still feel her tongue.” He opened his eyes and smiled at the ceiling. “We talked all night. She said she likes me. She still has to go out with Ash, ‘cause of her dad, but she likes *me!*”

Zachary looked Ben over. “Did you sleep?”

Ben stood. “I totally forgot. Zagan’s probably pissed. You can’t tell him.”

Zachary shook his head. “I won’t. Were you supposed to meet?”

“You’re not the only one with a commission, you know.”

“I didn’t know,” Zachary said. “What is it?”

“I’m not supposed to say. It’s more of a private thing.”

“What happened to commissions belong to all of us?”

“Things change, Zack.” Ben started to walk out and stopped. “William doesn’t know.”

Zachary pulled his eyebrows together.

“Look. Zagan wants to keep it private for now,” Ben said. He shook his head and patted Zachary on the shoulder. “We both have secrets. You keep mine; I’ll keep yours.”

“I don’t have any secrets,” Zachary said.

“Really?” Ben smirked. “Emma? Beth? Who knows what else? I’m learning from the master.”

Zachary gave Ben a cold stare.

“Hate for something to slip out in front of Zagan.” Ben faked a punch to Zachary’s stomach. Ben studied Zachary’s hard expression. “I’m just kidding. I won’t say anything.” Ben walked out. “I’m starving. Hope William’s up.”

Zachary followed him into the hallway and watched Ben skip down the stairs.

“What’s up with him?” Bethany asked.

“Nothing. Just slept good, I guess.” Zachary smiled. “What about you? Sleep well?”

“Shut up.” Bethany pushed him as she walked past. “Better get dressed. Don’t want to miss your date with William.”

Zachary gasped. “I forgot.” He headed toward his bedroom as Claire bounced out of her bathroom.

“Mornin’, Zack,” Claire said as she hugged his legs. She started to walk to the stairs then turned and ran into her room then back out in two seconds carrying several books. “I almost forgot. It’s library day. Last week, Miss Rose didn’t let me get new ones ‘cause I forgotted these ones.”

He watched the little girl run down the stairs then went into his room and picked through his clothes. He pulled a shirt over his head and dug through his other drawers, throwing his dirty jeans on the floor and putting on the clean stuff. He had no idea what William had planned for the day. He just didn’t want to miss science class with Emma.

William drove out of town then turned onto a two-lane highway. When Zachary fell asleep William drove in silence for a couple of hours. He hit a bump and Zachary stirred and lifted his head. He looked at Zachary who was turning back after reading the “South Central Correctional Center” sign. William doubted himself. Maybe this was a mistake?

He hadn't figured out if Zachary was the right one. This was risky.

William sucked in a breath. "You're probably wondering where we're going."

Zachary raised his eyebrows and looked at him. "Prison?"

"I want you to meet someone," William said as he stared at the road.

"In prison?"

"I know it doesn't make sense," William said. "I promise it will."

"In prison?" Zachary repeated.

William continued to ignore him as he slowed and turned onto a narrow street with a sign that read, "No unauthorized vehicles." Zachary watched William pull toward a huge gate with a guard station on each side. William stopped the Escalade and lowered his window.

"Good morning, Mr. Sable," the guard said as William handed him his driver's license.

"Good morning, Pete," William said. The guard took the license and marked something on a clipboard. "How's Emily? And little Bart?"

The guard smiled. "Bart's a spitfire, and Emily's got her mom in town, making my life a living hell." He handed the license back. "Thank God for work. If I had to stay with Mildred all day, I'm afraid you'd be visiting *me* in here."

"Ah, Pete. You know you'd never do anything."

"Don't be too sure of that, Mr. Sable. One mistake separates us on the outside from those inside." The guard spun his finger over his head and shouted, "Open 'er up!" He nodded to them as William drove through the large gate.

William parked the car, shut it off, and looked at Zachary. "Before we go in, you're going to have to promise me something."

Zachary lifted his palms and eyed William.

“I have to know I can trust you, Zack. You can’t tell anyone. At least for now,” William said.

*Another secret. Perfect,* Zachary thought as he stared at William.

“I’m serious.” William’s face hardened.

“I promise. I won’t tell anyone. Okay?”

William sighed and put his hands on the steering wheel. “Look. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have brought you here,” he said as he started the Escalade.

“No,” Zachary quickly said. “It’s fine. Whatever it is. I promise I’ll keep it a secret.”

“Are you sure?” William asked. “Not even Zagan can know about this.”

“Absolutely,” Zachary said. “No one will know. Can we just go in?”

William thought for several seconds. He’d known the soul sitting next to him for longer than he could remember. He’d always been loyal to a fault. He shut the engine off and looked at Zachary. “Okay. Let’s go in.”

They got out, and Zachary followed William toward another gate manned by two guards. They both seemed to know William and let him pass easily. Zachary looked back at an extremely secure entrance that somehow William breezed through. They navigated through three more gates before meeting a man in an ill-fitted suit.

“Welcome, Mr. Sable,” the man said as he enthusiastically shook William’s hand. “He’s ready, but he hasn’t had the best day. Are you sure you want to see him?”

“I’m sure, Wesley,” William said as he turned toward Zachary. “This is my nephew, Zack.”

Wesley took Zachary’s hand and said, “Zack, I’ve heard so much about you. It’s good to meet you.”

Zachary tried to hide his disgust at the flimsy, sweaty hand in his. How did this guy get into any position of power

with such a fishy handshake? Zachary studied the name badge on the man's lapel. "Good to meet you, Mr. Aero."

The man smiled. "Let's drop the formalities. You can call me Wesley." He turned to William and said, "What a fine boy, Mr. Sable. A future officer." He looked back at Zachary. "When you're ready, come talk to me."

"I'll do that, Wesley." Zachary tried to smile.

"Fine, my boy." Wesley stared at Zachary for an uncomfortable minute.

"We have a schedule," William prodded.

"Oh, yes. Right," Wesley stumbled. "Officer Blake will take you in."

William gave Wesley a tight smile as Officer Blake led them down a hall to a large metal door. The officer raised his head and waved to a camera behind a metal screen. After several loud clangs, the door squealed open, and the officer stepped aside.

William nodded at him and stepped through the door. Zachary followed and stopped, staring at a scarred face on a bald head. The man was huge. William took a seat opposite the behemoth. Zachary looked at the man's badly scarred hands and took little comfort in the chains that looped through a metal clasp on the table in front of him. It looked like the guy could snap the chains in nothing flat.

William leaned back and asked, "One more chair?"

"Yes, sir," the guard said. He retrieved another chair and put it at the table. He walked out and closed the door, locking the three in the room alone.

Zachary looked between the chair and the huge man.

"Sit, Zack," William commanded.

He sat.

"This him?" the inmate said.

William nodded.

"You sure we can trust him?"

"We can."

The man nodded and unclasped his hands. "Tell me your name, boy."

Zachary shuddered at the sight of his deformed flesh. "It... it's Zack, sir," Zachary stuttered.

The man laughed a deep, ominous tone. "Not your human name, boy!"

Zachary looked at William. He nodded.

"Tiamanicus."

A smile crept over the man's face.



## 2.4 *William Takes a Chance*

THE DRIVE HOME WAS QUIET. WILLIAM NERVOUSLY GLANCED at the back of Zachary's head. Zachary leaned his forehead on the side window, focusing on his breath steaming up the window and dissipating as the countryside streaked by. He gently circled his finger on the promise ring in his pocket. Humans had it easy. They could make mistakes. Sure there were consequences, but nothing eternal. Not for the smart ones anyway. Forgiveness from the Selfish One is always waiting.

For centuries, his only purpose was to distract the pitiful creatures of this world from the only thing that really mattered. The only thing with true eternal consequences. The only thing they could do to redeem themselves in the Father's eyes. And it wasn't something they physically had to do. They have only to believe, to trust, to ask for the Savior's forgiveness.

A result of the worst day. Only three days after the Greatest Day, the triumph of Lucifer. The day the Selfish

One forsook the Son and gave Himself over to our lord in our greatest victory. The victory we'd waited for so long for ripped from our grasp as the Christ slipped through our fingers.

We'd planned for centuries. We stood vigil, awaiting the gathering of Angels to protect the Chosen One as He was handed over to crucifixion. They never came. The Creator of the Universe died and was laid in a tomb. We whispered amongst the crowds to protect the single entry point. We surrounded Him in our domain and protected against all who would gain entrance to free Him. Lucifer and his leaders knew of the prophecy. Three days and His legions were to attempt His escape.

All stood vigil without rest. No legions came. No angels attempted entry to our realm. Then, He was gone, reunited with the Father. Lucifer raged, and I hid within our numbers as his anger shook the foundations of the Earth.

This is the day our lord realized God's true weakness. He will give everything, even Himself, to redeem His creation. Not for His first creations. Not for us, but for those He created to inhabit this small world. His act of death and sacrifice made it possible for His people to become one with Him by simply asking for the gift of redemption. By simply asking, it's freely given.

Tiamanicus couldn't ask. His decision was final before the formation of the world he now occupied. For a demon, belief was a given. He knew all-to-well who Christ was. Before time was created, even Lucifer sang the praises of the Holy One.

Not that it mattered. On the last day, Lucifer will defeat the Selfish One and throw the redeemed into the pit God prepared for the fallen. Without realizing it, God had created a tomb to house Himself and the precious people He'd foolishly given Himself to save.

That day, Tiamanicus realized his true calling. He'd spent centuries whispering inspiration to leaders of the world. He had them create items to worship. He led them far from the truth. Whole nations had followed and created gods of his design. But he was one among many Whisperers. On that day, Tiamanicus separated from the ordinary deceivers. He realized slight corruptions of the truth create great deceptions. Lucifer had used truth from the beginning to deceive. Truth was the key. Even truth can mislead if one is clever. Use God's own words to lead people to the wrong conclusion.

Such a simple task. Since the fall of man on the greatest day in the garden, people wanted to be their own god, to control their own lives. By inspiring them to slightly lower their understanding of God and raise their perception of man, they will simply fool themselves. In the last centuries, he had effortlessly infiltrated Christ's bride and allowed God's own people to attempt to define God by their own limited understanding.

His real accomplishments came this very century, leading men to build entire religions based on lowering God's sovereignty and raising man's opinion of himself, all while using actual scripture to support the lies.

Truth is a powerful ally in the craft of deception.

Millions now believe their ultimate achievement is to raise themselves to a godhood of their own creation. He knew this was what had brought the attention of their great lord. This is why he sat in William's SUV at this moment watching the landscape rush by on this empty highway.

William sucked in a breath, opened his mouth, closed it again, and looked at the road in front of him.

Zachary straightened and looked forward. "Why me?" He paused. "Why not Beth or Ben?"

"They're not ready," William said as he glanced at Zachary.

Zachary stared forward.

“You’ve adjusted much faster,” William said.

Zachary blanched. Seriously? He was mess. He was physically shaking. William had no idea how close he’d come to messing up everything last night with Bethany. He thought of how close they’d come to total destruction if William hadn’t come home when he did.

“You’re strong, Zack.”

Zachary looked at William. “Strong? Are you kidding me?”

“You’re stronger than you know.” William studied Zachary’s face. Zachary shook his head, and William said, “If it wasn’t for Goddard—”

“You should’ve told me,” Zachary spit.

“I did warn you.”

“You said it was against the rules.”

“I told you I lost someone.”

Zachary eyed William. “You didn’t tell me it was you! And Claire’s mother?”

William knit his brow and looked at Zachary. “This has to stay between us.”

“They need to know.” Zachary focused his eyes on William who wouldn’t meet his gaze. He watched the man he’d thought was so strong. William’s jaw twitched, and Zachary watched a bead of sweat form on the man’s forehead. *Was he shaking?*

William rubbed his mouth, dragged his hand down his chin over the two day’s growth on his neck and sighed. “You’re right.” His eyes briefly met Zachary’s before focusing on the road. “When it’s time.”

“It’s time now!”

William swung his head and gritted his teeth. “No, Zack.”

“But—”

“I said no,” William ordered.

“What about Claire?”

William’s face softened. His eyes flitted between the road and Zachary. “We have to keep her out of this.”

The streets started to become familiar as William drove into the town of Inspiration. Zachary studied William’s face. “If it doesn’t work, Zagan will—”

“Zagan won’t be focused on anything but me,” William said. “Trust me. Taking my house is all he’s wanted since my name was announced at the commissioning. A role promised to him. Relinquishing my embodiment to him will feed his overly zealous pride. Zagan will be basking in the taste of victory.”

“Pride,” Zachary said. William tilted his head. Zachary looked at him. “Is that why you’ve never told Bethany or Ben?”

William sighed and smiled. “Pride and I have been strangers since I lost Sarah.” William steered the SUV into the driveway and stopped. He shut off the engine without opening the garage, staring at the custom wooden slats on the large door. “Remember what I always say about embodying a human?”

Zachary looked at the house. “Human body, human problems?”

“That’s right. Goddard used to tell me the same thing. I didn’t get it then. This life, Sarah and Claire, being with them taught me I can love again.” Zachary watched a tear fall from William’s eye. “Do you see it, Zack?” William fixed his eyes on Zack’s. “After hating for an eternity, we *can* love. And not just ourselves. You’ve felt it. I know you have. When you’re with Emma. Claire. Even Ben or Beth. You care. I see it. What would you do for them?”

Zachary shook his head. He didn’t know what to think. Sure he loved himself, but he can’t love. Not anymore. Not since the Selfish One removed His presence from all who followed Lucifer. The Great One taught him of a greater

love. One to fulfill his own desires. One of praise. One of confidence and strength. One of deception and manipulation. The love of power and dominance.

William swallowed, turned his head away, and drew a long breath. “Go in and shower. I’ll get you to school before your last period.”



25 *A Chill on a Spring Day*

ZACHARY OPENED THE DOOR WITHOUT LOOKING AT William. He slowly walked into the house and up the stairs. As he stepped into the shower, he considered his options. As it turned out, William wasn't the strong leader he'd been led to believe. He'd given in. He'd failed, and Zagan didn't even know it. If it weren't for Goddard, he'd have been exposed and vanquished by the angels. He could expose William. Maybe he'd be rewarded. Zagan had nearly promised him a command of legions.

Zachary stood under the water and watched the streams fall to the drain. *Why would Goddard defend William? Why is he willing to sit a human lifetime in a jail cell?* The battle must have been spectacular. Angels and Talkers. The heavenly realm and demons in human form. He'd heard of great battles, but they always ended with vanquished Talkers, souls stripped of both earthly and spiritual form. *How was Goddard still here?*

No one knew for sure what it was like to be formless. Those with firsthand experience had been escorted by the

gatekeepers far from sight. Their continuous wails a distant ambience, a constant reminder of why one doesn't fail our lord. One soul told him he'd heard from Lucifer himself that the sensation was akin to having the skin ripped from your body and left in the heat of the desert, only finding relief through dowsing yourself with cool rocky soil over exposed nerves to quench the heat.

He watched his uncertainty swirl down the drain. He wouldn't betray William. He wouldn't put Claire in danger. He wouldn't even risk Bethany, though she would certainly betray him. And Ben. What an idiot! Thinking he could have a girlfriend? A life? Like that won't end badly. For the time being, he would play along with William's plan. He could always change his mind later.

He had to stay focused on Emma, his commission. Perhaps he could fulfill his purpose, gain admiration, and still help William. He threw a t-shirt over his head and slid some jeans on. Snatching his old pants and digging his finger into the pocket he grabbed the promise ring. He paused when he noticed the worn circle on the leg. As he dropped the ring into his pocket he noticed the same worn spot on his clean jeans. He hadn't gone a day without the small token of his body's former life against his thigh. He wondered if anyone had noticed. Probably not.

The ride to school was quiet. William pulled to the curb. Zachary opened the door and stepped out. He paused with his hand on the door and looked at the old school building. A warmth snaked down his back and sprung roots, pushing through the concrete, around the school, encircling the street and spreading throughout the town.

The large double doors of the school opened as a young couple stepped out and faced each other, holding hands, looking in each other's eyes. He couldn't hear what they said, but they both smiled as they talked. The girl slid her arm around the boy's waist, and he followed suit as they hugged

and their lips came together. The door opened, and a woman in a suit came out. He couldn't make out the words, but he could tell the woman wasn't pleased. The young couple laughed as they ran off with their hands joined.

A cool breeze kissed his face, surrounding him with the scent of spring. He looked up to the trees and watched a group of birds spin and dance across the tops. He couldn't place his emotions. Faces flashed in his memory, images of Ben, Bethany, Sarah, Claire, William, and Goddard. His mind settled on Emma Louise Green. Her smile, her tears, her nearly black eyes that cried as he observed from the other realm.

This world had so much to offer. Not just pain, betrayal, separation, and deception as he'd always seen. Life was fleeting and full of hurt, but still held promise. He didn't know how much longer he would be in this body, but he would do whatever it took to push the pain of life far away from those around him. With William's insane plan, he was sure his protection wouldn't last long.

"Zack?" William quietly breathed.

Zachary sighed and dropped his shoulders. "I'll do what you asked." Zachary saw a hint of a smile in William's eyes as he shut the door and turned toward the building. The bell rang, signaling the break before last period. He was invigorated at the thought of seeing Emma's beautiful face, imagining the smile that would soon greet him.

He buried himself within the crowd of teenagers and headed toward Mr. White's room. The hall flashed as Whisperers darted in and out of view. Zachary watched one dart past and land on a girl's shoulder. The girl looked at Zachary, and her unseen companion searched the hall to locate what had drawn her attention. The small demon looked right through him, and Zachary remembered how it saw the world. He thought about how much his old eyes missed. The creature on her wouldn't notice the girl's blue

eyes or the way her dusty brown hair was pulled back to reveal a slight jawline leading to a small solitaire glistening from her ear as her head turned.

He knew what it saw. He'd shared its view of the world and mankind from the beginning. A human's past, present, hurts, hungers, needs, or desires were not a concern. He turned a wide circle and looked at what was happening. These young people had no idea how their world conspired against them. Thoughts and ideas were constantly thrust into their minds without consent. Even those who tried to live as the Selfish One intended didn't have a chance. His kind had more power in their lives than even they knew. If it weren't for one small, seemingly insignificant act, the Selfish One's enemies would have complete control.

Prayer.

He'd seen it. An utterance of the name of God will scatter demons. For that very reason, Lucifer had sent swarms of Whisperers over the Earth to confound the true meaning of God. To remove the meaning of the Son's death and resurrection from the hearts of men. To confuse who He was and what His life and death meant to this world's inhabitants. Confusion was easy. Even demons couldn't comprehend the true nature of the God of the Universe. And they were once in His presence.

There was little prayer in this town. Not anymore, anyway.

Last night in Emma's room, his realm seemed foreign. The color of her eyes was hidden. The beauty of her weakness and fragility was lost. He wanted to see her. Not from his realm. Not with those eyes. He wanted to see her as a human. He couldn't explain it, but as he watched a tear fall, something changed. Standing next to Zagan and watching the angels turn had hurt. He wanted to comfort her, but he couldn't.

The two minute bell rang, and the hall scurried with activity. He walked quickly and saw Emma stepping into the

room. He bumped into Brad, Bethany's ex boyfriend, and stopped.

"Watch it," Brad said. Several letterman jackets surrounded Zachary.

"Sorry," Zachary said as he tried to push through the circle forming around him.

One of the jocks pushed him back and said, "Tell your cousin to back off."

Zachary looked at Brad and said, "Didn't you break up with Emma?"

The jock grabbed Zachary by the shoulders and spun him around. Zachary looked at the stitching on the jacket and read the word "Gray." He felt his gut collapse, and he hunched over trying to catch his breath.

The jock apparently named Gray said, "Tell your little cousin to lay off my brother's girlfriend."

Zachary forced himself up and eyed the guy. "It's not my problem if your brother can't satisfy a girl."

Zachary felt a burst of pain in his lower back, and he fell to the floor.

A voice called out, "What's going on here?" The lettermen circle spread.

"Nothing, Mr. White. Zack slipped," Brad said. "We were just helping him up."

Mr. White eyed the boys and stepped through the group. "Is that true?"

Zachary looked up at the guys and nodded. Brad held his hand out, and Zachary just glared at it. Brad shrugged his shoulders. "Fine. I offered."

Mr. White bent down and grabbed Zachary's arm, lifting him to his feet. The lettermen group smiled and started walking away. The one named Gray turned and said, "Hopefully, Ben will be smarter than you," then walked off.

"Let me guess," Mr. White said as he walked Zachary toward the classroom. "Little Annabelle Carmine and Ben

Sable are sneaking around?” Zachary looked at the older teacher and tilted his head. Mr. White laughed. “Please. Inspiration schools are like a never ending soap opera.” The two of them entered the class, and all eyes were on Zachary. Mr. White whispered, “If you just listen, you’ll hear what’s going on with everyone,” as he nodded his head toward Emma who seemed like the only soul in the room not interested in why Zachary and Mr. White entered holding each other like some sort of couple.

Zachary hobbled to the seat next to her and said, “Sorry about lunch. I had to help William.”

“Oh. No worries.” She shrugged without looking up. “I forgot anyway.”

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she replied, still focused on her book.

Mr. White spoke up, “Miss Green? Is there something you’d like to share with the class?”

“No, Mr. White,” Emma said. “You can go on.”

“Mr. Sable?” the teacher asked. “Do I have your permission, as well?”

The class laughed. Zachary shrank and looked at Emma who wouldn’t meet his gaze. Zachary felt a chill encircle his chest and take root deep in his gut. He tried to think of what he’d done.



26 *Meet the Parent*

WHEN THE BELL RANG, EMMA SHOVED HER BOOK IN THE backpack and walked out. Zachary packed his quickly and ran after her. He caught up in the hall and asked, “Did I do something wrong?”

“I don’t know. Did you?” she responded without stopping.

Zachary paused. He racked his stupid human brain. As far as she knew he hadn’t seen her since yesterday. He ran to catch up again as she headed toward the student lot. “Emma, you’re scaring me. Tell me what’s wrong.”

Emma stopped with her back to Zachary and leaned on her dad’s primer gray fender. “It’s not you, Zack. It’s everyone else. My dad, church, everything.” She turned to Zachary and said, “I’m sorry I’m taking it out on you. I shouldn’t. You’re the only good thing in my life right now. You’re the only one I can trust, and I’m messing it up.”

Zachary took her hands and said, “You’re not messing anything up. I care about you, Emma Louise Green.”

She slid her hands out of his and ran them up his chest, feeling his heartbeat. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I couldn’t sleep—”

“I know. It’s okay.”

She pushed back and tilted her head. “You know I couldn’t sleep?”

“No. I mean... I could tell you’re stressed, and... you look tired.”

She shook it off. “Can I meet you at the paper? I need to talk to my dad first.”

Zachary noticed the truck. “Why are you driving today? Doesn’t your dad need the truck?”

“Yeah. It’s a long story. He’s home today.”

“Perfect. You need to talk to him, and I’ve been wanting to meet him.” Zachary slid past her and opened the passenger door.

“It’s probably not a good day,” Emma said as she followed him.

“From what I can tell, it’s always a bad day,” Zachary said as he slid onto the bench seat, shoving the wad of bulletin papers toward the middle, and shut the door. “Might as well be today.”

Emma stood staring at him for several seconds before sighing. He was right. Why was she hesitating? She liked this guy. Really liked him. He’s not a popular jock like her last jerk of a boyfriend who abandoned her along with the rest of the town. This guy was different. He even put up with her crazy, which, although it was a new trait, was even starting to bug her.

She walked to the other door and slid onto the bench, cringing at the jumble of papers on the seat. She usually didn’t leave trash lying around. As he collected them and shoved them over the passenger visor, she said, “Sorry. I guess I’ve been too busy to pick up.” She slid over and put her hand on his thigh. Zachary felt every nerve in his body fire at once,

and he struggled to stay calm. He looked at her and was finally rewarded with the smile he'd longed for. She pursed her lips. "He's probably having a bad day, so..."

Zachary raised his right hand. "I promise I'll be good."

"It's not you I'm worried about," she said as she worked the gearshift and turned to back out of the parking space. She maneuvered the gears, and Zachary cringed at the transmission's screams of protest. She aimed the truck toward the road and pulled onto the street. "There's a reason he couldn't work today."

"Is he sick?"

She turned a corner and shook her head. "That would've been better. He works when he's sick." Zachary stared at her. "He literally couldn't work. Mr. Carmine himself called him and told him to stay off site."

Carmine sounded familiar to Zachary, but he couldn't place why. "Who's Mr. Carmine?"

"C.G. Construction. Carmine and Gray," she stated flatly. "Carmine's one of his bosses. C.G. kind of rules this town. Gray's boys are big time jocks."

"Ashton," Zachary breathed.

"Yeah, and his bigger jerkier brother, Blake. Why? Do you know them?"

"As it turns out, I just met Blake before Mr. White's class today. Seems like a swell guy. Why'd he call your dad?"

She took another corner. "It's the site of the new church, and apparently, Heath called for a vote yesterday after we left. As long as the C.G. crew is working for the church, Dad can't work for them."

"They can do that?" Zachary asked. "Who's Heath?"

Emma huffed. "Apparently, they can. Heath used to be Dad's best friend. You met him yesterday. He goes by Pastor Coal now."

"Oh," Zachary said. "Is that what upset you yesterday?"

Emma pinched her lips together. "I met him just before I started high school. He was like an uncle; then, he started acting all weird. Now, it's like he doesn't even talk to me. I don't know what I did, but it's like he hates me. When he got Daddy kicked out of church, I thought he couldn't hurt us anymore. Then, the building fund recovery program started. Heath got the contractor fired last week, so they hired C.G. Now, it's all started again. It's like he's doing everything to destroy us, and I have no idea why."

Emma slowed and pulled into the driveway next to the house he visited the night before. The house was small, but well maintained with a single garage. Zachary marveled at how different their lives were. Something about this place made him feel comfortable in a way William's house couldn't.

She turned to him and raised her eyebrows. "This is it. It's not much to look at..."

"It's beautiful," Zachary said.

She shook her head. "Your place is beautiful."

"My place is too big."

"I don't think 'too big' is even possible for a house. And you have a pool." She smiled.

He shrugged. "I didn't even know about the pool."

She wrinkled her nose. "You're so strange. How did you not know you had a pool?"

"I don't know. I never really looked. It's not like I ever plan to use it."

"Well, I plan on using it." She put her finger on his nose. "And I don't put on a bikini for just anyone."

Zachary thought about it. Emma Louise Green in a bikini? Yeah! Maybe a pool is a good thing. "Okay, then. It's a date."

"Yeah, it is," she said as she slid closer to him. Their mouths met, and he felt her lips smile against his. He let out a small moan as the tip of her tongue slid across his. She kissed him deeply as she sat up on her knees. "So, tell me,

Zachary Sable,” she swung her leg over him and pulled away, “are you a trunks or a Speedo guy?”

His hands slid down her back, followed the curve, and rested low and tight. “What’s a Speedo?”

She laughed and lowered herself onto him. “Why do I love that you don’t know what a Speedo is?”

She rocked against him and threw her head back. He couldn’t resist kissing down her delicate neckline. She pushed herself up until his lips met the top of her breasts. He breathed in a deep, flowery scent as he buried his lips in the small amount the t-shirt revealed. She let out a soft moan as she tangled her hands in his hair, driving his face into her chest.

“I’m not sure I’m ready for you, Zachary Sable,” she said with a heavy exhale.

The door flew open, and Zachary felt a jolt. Emma was left in the truck as Zachary landed on the ground with a thud.

“Get off her, you little bastard!” a gruff voice spat.

Zachary looked up to see a middle-aged man in jeans and a white t-shirt holding both hands tightly fist. The man looked at Emma and asked, “Are you okay, baby? Did he hurt you?”

Emma scrambled out of the passenger side and stood between the man and Zachary. “What the hell, Daddy? Leave him alone!”

Daddy?

“I saw what he was doing to you!” he shouted. “What’ll the neighbors think?” His eyes focused on Zachary, and he reached down and clutched Zachary’s collar. “Nobody does that to my baby!”

Emma slapped her father across the face, and he dropped the boy. “He’s my boyfriend, you idiot!”

*Boyfriend?* Zachary smiled. “Did you say boyfriend?”

Emma stopped and looked at Zachary. She looked around and waved at the neighbors who peered out windows and stood on porches. She turned to her father and the guy on the ground and said, "Now if you two *idiots* want to go inside, we can talk about this." She turned and left them in the driveway staring at each other. She pulled the screen door open, gave them a harsh look, and walked in, letting it slam behind her.

Zachary forced a smile and reached his hand out. "Hi, Mr. Green. I'm Zack." He nodded his head toward the porch. "The boyfriend."

The man stared at Zachary's hand and huffed. He turned and walked toward his daughter. Zachary put his hand down, started to get up, and muttered, "Well, that could've gone better."



27 *Family Business*

MR. GREEN RIPPED THE SCREEN DOOR OPEN AND STOMPED inside. Zachary caught the screen only to be stopped short by the front door slamming in his face. He could hear them shouting inside.

“What are you doing?” Emma screamed.

“No, you don’t,” her father said softly, but firmly.

“Don’t touch me. Get out of my way!”

On the porch, Zachary turned to look at several neighbors who’d been watching from the safety of their windows and porches. He gave them a quick wave and looked back at the door. Was he supposed to leave? He felt the eyes of the neighbors on the back of his head. He jumped as something hit the door.

He stepped back as the door flew open, and Emma reached her hand out. “You can come in, Zack,” Emma said as she scowled at her father over her shoulder. Zachary looked at Mr. Green and shifted his weight. Emma looked

back at him. "Please, Zack. I promise he'll be good." She eyed her father. "Right, Daddy?"

Mr. Green huffed. "Best get in here, boy. You're causing a scene out there."

*I'm causing a scene?*

He put his hand in Emma's and slowly stepped in with his eyes trained on the angry man.

"Close the door," Mr. Green ordered.

Zachary nodded slowly and waved at the onlookers as he clicked the door shut. If this was the last of him, at least there would be witnesses.

Emma clutched Zachary's hand. "Daddy, this is Zack."

He offered his free hand. Mr. Green looked at it for several seconds before stepping up to Zachary, the man's stare nearly drilling a hole in the boy's brain. "Look here, boy. What you did to my little girl in plain view of God and all the good folks on our street is intolerable." He looked down at Zachary's hand and swatted it away.

"What *he* did to *me*?" Emma said as she stepped between the two men. Emma watched her father, clenching his fists and grinding his teeth. She cut him off. "Maybe *I* was doing it to *him*, Daddy. Did ya' consider that?"

Mr. Green blanched. "That's ridiculous. I brought you up better than—"

"Better than what, Daddy?" Emma shot back. "How'd you bring me up? What did growing up in your house teach me? How to lie? How to cheat?"

Mr. Green flinched. "I don't have to stand in my own house and listen to this." He looked at Zachary. "It's best you go home, boy." He looked at Emma. "Seems we got things to work out."

Zachary nodded, but Emma said, "No, Daddy. He's not leaving." She turned to Zachary and repeated, "You're not leaving."

Zachary shook his head and took a step back. "Maybe I should go."

"Please stay," Emma said.

Zachary's eye twitched as he watched water gather in hers. She was about to cry while her father was nearing homicide. He knew it wasn't the best move for his health, but he couldn't leave her. He didn't know why, but she needed him. And for some reason, he needed her. He looked in her eyes. "I won't leave you."

Her face softened, and her lip quivered. He felt a wall he'd built around his heart for centuries crumble and fall at his feet. He wanted to erect a fortress around the two of them that could withstand a thousand armies.

"Fine," Mr. Green spat and jabbed his finger in Zachary's chest. "Stay, but keep out of family business."

"That's the problem," Emma said. Her father arched an eyebrow. "It's family business; isn't it, Daddy?" She released Zachary's hand and faced her father. "Only, we never talk about it!"

Mr. Green waved his hand. "We talk."

Emma huffed and her eyes glistened. "Sure. We talk. 'How's school, Emma?' 'How's Work?' 'Paper doing good?' 'Samuel and Liddy good?'" Her lip quivered as she took another step closer. "We need to talk about it! I need to talk about it!"

Mr. Green crossed his arms, then put them at his side and stepped back. He leaned against a worn wingback chair and crossed his arms again. "What—" He uncrossed his arms and placed his hand on the chair. "What do you want to talk—?"

"Mom," Emma quietly interrupted. She rubbed her palm over her cheek. "I need to talk about Mom, Daddy."

Mr. Green took refuge behind the oversized chair and shook his head. "You know I can't...."

“I lost her, too.” A tear streamed down Emma’s cheek, and she pinched her lips. “I lost my mom. I watched her die.” Emma’s chest heaved. “I’m the one that sat with her. Fed her. Cleaned her when she couldn’t make it to the bathroom.”

Mr. Green shook his head and flexed his jaw. He looked at his feet as he pulled a handkerchief from his shirt pocket and rubbed his nose. “Emma.”

Emma’s shoulders dropped as she looked at him. “I don’t blame you, Daddy. I know you loved her.”

He cocked his head. “Don’t *blame* me?”

Emma shook. “I know you’d have done anything for her.”

“Baby, I didn’t...”

“It’s okay, Daddy,” she said. “You don’t have to lie to me anymore. I forgive you.”

He shook his head. “I’m not perfect, but I didn’t take the money.”

“Maybe if we tell Heath and confess to the church?” Emma said as she walked toward her father.

He stepped back and put his palms up. “I’m not admitting to something I didn’t do.”

Emma walked to the old couch and rummaged through her backpack. She retrieved several papers and held them up. “I have the statements, Daddy.” She walked toward him. “The payments and transfers all line up.” She held them out to him.

He waved his hand and took a step back. “You don’t understand, Emma. That wasn’t—”

“Dad,” she said. “They’re in your name. I told you. I don’t blame you. I would’ve done the same thing. Let’s just go to the finance committee. They’ll understand. We’ll tell them we’ll pay it back. I can get a second job. You can donate half your salary. If we work together, we’ll make it work.”

“No!” Mr. Green spat. His eyes were wide and hard. “Listen to me, Emma. You don’t understand. Do you have any idea how much you’re talking about?”

“I haven’t added it all up. I know it’s a lot, but—”

“Over two hundred thousand dollars,” Mr. Green said.

Emma gasped and cocked her head. “Well.” She pursed her lips. “It’s a little more than I thought, but...”

“We couldn’t pay it back if we wanted to,” Mr. Green told his daughter. “Emma, listen to me.” He walked up to her and held her shoulders. “I didn’t know the payments were being made. I thought the insurance—”

“Dad, the church canceled your insurance a year before Mom was diagnosed.”

“No.” He stood straight. “Liddy told me they would cover it. She said I just needed to take care of her.”

“It’s all here.” Emma held the papers out again.

“That’s not possible.” He took the papers from Emma and flipped through them. “They were still deducting it from my checks.” He looked up and walked to a cluttered desk in the corner. “I’ll show you.” He rummaged through several drawers. “Here it is.” He held a half-sheet of paper up.

Emma walked to him and looked in his eyes before taking it. She studied the sheet and raised an eyebrow. “Did you show this to anyone?”

“Didn’t think I needed to.”

Emma pursed her lips. Zachary cocked his head as he watched her eyes focus on the floor then dart wildly. She looked at Zachary. “We gotta go to work.” She scooped up her backpack and snatched the keys off the end table. “Can we take the truck?” She swung the door open and looked back to Zachary.

“Oh,” Zachary said as he watched her eyes focus on him. He turned to Mr. Green and reached his hand toward the man. “It was nice to meet you, sir.” Mr. Green looked at his

hand. Emma cleared her throat. He shrugged his shoulders, dropped his hand, and followed her out.

Mr. Green watched the door shut. "Sure, take the truck. I got nowhere to go."



28 *Pastor Coal's Business*

“WHY’RE YOU IN SUCH A HURRY?” ZACHARY ASKED AS EMMA navigated the old truck down Central Avenue.

“I have to check something.” She turned down the alley behind the newspaper building. A midnight blue BMW sedan was parked next to the back door. “What’s he doing here?”

Zachary looked at the car and raised his eyebrows. The brakes let out a small squeal as she navigated into a spot next to the perfectly detailed car. She opened her door and stepped out. Zachary followed her lead. She held her finger to her lips. “Don’t say anything.” As she started to walk toward the door, he followed behind her. “Pretend everything’s normal.”

Zachary twitched his lip and shrugged. “Shouldn’t be too difficult.”

She clutched the door handle and paused to look at Zachary. Taking a deep breath, she slowly opened it and peaked in. Zachary started to walk, but she put her hand up. Angry voices shouted from within. She put her finger to

her lips again, and he nodded. Gently, she opened the door enough to squeeze in and waved for Zachary to follow her, closing the door behind them. They stood listening behind a rack of paper.

Samuel, Liddy, and a man in a suit argued in the office. The door was half open, and their voices echoed through the machinery.

“I will not,” Samuel said.

“You will, Mr. Wheat,” the man said.

“She’s been through so much, Heath,” Liddy begged. “You can’t expect...?”

When the man turned to Liddy, Zachary recognized the preacher and watched two Whisperers circle his head. He looked up and saw two more Whisperers perched on the open wooden rafters. Zachary whispered, “Isn’t that—”

“Shh,” Emma said, nodding. “I need to hear.”

The pastor smiled and looked at Liddy. “Please address me as Pastor Coal. Need I remind you, Miss Lydia? You and your father were in this long before I became involved.”

Liddy pinched her lips and wrapped her arms over her chest. She shook her head. “It’s just not right. You already got C.G. to fire Pastor Green.”

The man’s teeth clenched. “I’m the Pastor now!” A demon landed on his shoulder, and he sucked in a deep breath as his tensed shoulders fell back into place. “Give her a couple of days if it makes you feel better. Then, she’s gone. Understand me? We’ll make it clear the Greens no longer have a place in Inspiration.”

Liddy gripped herself tighter and stared at the floor. Samuel stood, set his jaw and said, “As long as I’m here, Emma’s welcome. Threaten all you want, Heath.” Pastor Coal grimaced. “What would your beloved flock do if—”

Pastor Coal put his hand up. “I know you’ll do what’s required. This town can’t handle another scandal. It’s up to us to work together.” He smiled, and Samuel’s neck tightened.

The door behind Zachary and Emma flew open, and they swung around to see an older woman in overalls walk in followed by the echo of the door slamming.

“Well, hello, Miss Em,” the woman said.

“Um... hi, Merna,” Emma said as she brushed her hair behind her ears.

Merna’s eyes fell on Zachary. Emma blanched as she watched the older lady’s gaze pass from his shoulders to his chest to his stomach.

“And who is your handsome friend, Miss Em?” Merna smiled as she reached for Zachary’s arm.

“I’m Zack,” Zachary said, his eyes resting on her hand caressing his bicep.

“Yes, you are,” Merna smiled.

“Merna? Is that you?” Samuel called loudly.

“It sure is, Sweetie,” Merna answered. “Me, Miss Em, and—”

“It’s us, too, Sam,” Emma shouted. “We’re all here together. I mean, we all just showed up.”

Merna tilted her head and smirked. She shrugged; then, they all walked into the bindery. Merna smiled as she saw Pastor Coal walking out of the office. “Well, as I live and breathe. If it isn’t the good Pastor Coal. What an honor to see you outside of Sunday.”

“Well, surely, it’s my great pleasure to see you, Miss Merna.” He smiled and greeted her with a kiss on the cheek.

“Well, Pastor. Keep that up, and I’ll find myself accidentally running into you more often.” Merna fluttered her hand in front of her face, cooling herself like a right proper southern lady.

The Pastor glanced at Zachary; then, his eyes fell on Emma. He reached for her shoulders. “Little Emma Louise. It’s always a pleasure. Tell me, how’s your father doing? I was so sorry to hear of his misfortune today.”

Emma's eyes betrayed the smile she painted on. "It's so good to see you, Heath. And how's your mother?"

Heath held his smile while his eyes narrowed. "Why it's so nice of you to ask. You remember? She had to return to Mississippi to care for her sister?"

"Yes, that's right. How's your aunt doing?"

Pastor Coal grimaced and shook his head. "Not well, I'm afraid." He glared at Samuel then smiled at Merna. "I best leave you good people to your important work."

Merna said, "Thank you so much for stopping by, Pastor."

Pastor Coal straightened. "I believe our business is done for now. Wouldn't you agree, Mr. Wheat?" He waved as he opened the door. As light from the alley streamed in, he mimicked a gun shot at Samuel. "Don't let me down, now," he said. The door closed behind him, leaving the old bindery ominously silent.

"It was so nice of the pastor to drop by," Merna said. "He's such a godly man."

Liddy squeezed her chest, and Samuel bit his lip. Emma and Zachary looked at their feet.

"You're early today," Samuel said to Merna.

"Yeah," Merna said as she flipped her hand. "Ed was driving me crazy. He's always starting a new project. Honestly, I don't know why he even retired. I thought I'd come in and help out before my route." She slapped her hands together and rubbed them briskly. "So, what do we gotta do to get these papers ready?"

"I have to get back to the shop," Liddy said. "I'll see you later, Dad." She looked at Emma, quickly walked to her, and pulled her into a tight hug. "I love you, Emma." She pulled away and looked in her eyes. "No matter what happens. Okay?"

"Of course, Liddy," Emma replied. "I love you, too."

Liddy released Emma and looked back at Samuel before leaving.

Emma looked at Merna and said, "I'm so glad you're here, Merna. I could use some help."

"Perfect. Anything to get out of the house."

"Can you do the typeset and burn plates?"

"You kidding?" Merna said as she waved her hand. "I used to do real typesetting and stripping back in the day. How much different could it be?"

"Great," Emma said. "Sam, can you get her started? Zack and I'll get the stock ready. When we're done, we'll do the last part of your route."

"That's not necessary, Em," Merna said.

"We insist," Emma responded with an easy smile. "I've got Dad's truck, and it's a nice day."

Merna opened her mouth, but Emma elbowed Zachary. He grunted. "It's no problem. I'd actually like to do it."

Merna smirked. "You'd better hold onto this one, Em. He's one of the good ones." She turned to Samuel. "Where do ya' keep that old typesetter?"

As the two turned and walked into the office, Samuel said, "Things have changed a little since you did it."

Emma turned to Zachary. "You'd like to do it?"

Zachary shrugged. "I don't know. I kind of like working. It feels like I'm getting something done."

Emma shook her head. "People don't *like* to work. They *have* to work."

"You don't like working here?"

Emma wrinkled her brow. "I guess I do." She smiled. "Sometimes, I think you know me better than I know myself." She led Zachary to the pallets on the shipping dock, shoved a pallet jack under one, and pumped the lever until it lifted off the ground. "Grab that box cutter and help me with this."

They dropped the skid next to the press and slit the plastic wrap. When they finished, they gathered the strapping and plastic then piled it in the dumpster. When they got back inside, they loaded several handfuls of paper into the

windmill feeders. Emma plucked several of the suction cups from the windmill pickers and stuffed them in her pocket.

"I need to get Samuel out of the office for something, okay?" Emma said. Zachary nodded. She grabbed a wrench and threw it on the ground. "Ouch! Damn it! Samuel!"

Zachary opened his eyes wide.

"Just go along with it," she whispered.

"Right."

Emma jumped and bit her lip while holding her middle finger in her other hand. Samuel ran out and yelled, "Emma! Are you okay?"

Emma cried out, "It wouldn't feed. When I tried to fix it..." She grimaced, and her eyes filled with tears. "The stupid thing bit me!"

"Let me take you to the doc," Samuel said.

"No," Emma responded as she grimaced and hunched, holding her finger. She made a show of opening her hand and looking at it. "It's not bleeding or broken. I can just run it under cold water. Can you help Zack with the feeder?"

"You sure you're okay?" Samuel asked.

"I'm fine." Her cheeks were wet with tears. "Just help Zack."

"Okay, Emma," Samuel said. "If you need to see the doc, he's right around the corner."

"It's already starting to feel better, Sam. I'll be fine."

Emma watched Samuel walk toward Zachary; then, she slipped into the office.

"You okay, dear?" Merna asked.

"I'm fine, Merna. It already feels better."

"Good. I may need some help here when you're done."

"Why?"

"It's these new computers. They just don't feel right."

Emma smirked. "You'll be fine."

"Give me a good old typewriter any day. These keys are way too easy. I like to work for my letters."

Emma rolled her eyes. “You can do it.” When Merna turned around, Emma headed into Samuel’s office. She glanced back at Merna before continuing to a door in the back. She turned the knob and opened it quietly. After one last check on Merna, she slipped in.

Emma flipped the light on, kneeled on the floor, and pulled at the bottom drawer on a filing cabinet. She reached in and pulled out a ledger with Inspiration Community Church handwritten across the top. She paged through it and looked at several entries, noting multiple entries with a small letter *b*. Others contained negative entries followed by asterisks. Soon, she heard Samuel’s voice and jumped up, hitting a small pile of old newsprints. She sucked in a breath and grabbed the pile before it fell.

Samuel shouted, “Ah! I found them!” A drawer snapped shut, and his voice receded. “Here’s what the old girl is missing. I’ll be damned if I know how they came off in the first place.”

Emma tried to calm her breathing. She scrambled to her feet but stopped when she saw a green ledger peeking out from under the pile of newspapers. She stooped then pulled it out. *B Ledger* was scrawled across the top in Samuel’s handwriting.

She gathered both books and slipped them under her shirt. On her way out, she shut the light off and peeked out the door. Merna was cursing herself as she attempted to type on the desktop keyboard. Emma slipped out the door and out of Samuel’s office, heading toward the bathroom and pushed through the door. Once inside, she turned the water on and opened the cabinet under the sink. She tucked the two ledgers behind several rolls of toilet paper before standing and looking at herself.

The girl in the mirror didn’t look like her. Since when does Emma Green sneak around? Since when does she not trust the people who’ve always looked out for her? As she

tucked her hair behind her ear, she tried to figure out what that argument with Heath was about. Heath said something about it starting before he got involved. She needed to know what started.

Emma opened the medicine cabinet and picked up a box of bandages. She took out two, tore the paper off, and wrapped her finger. Catching another glimpse of her reflection, she shook her head and looked away. She pushed the door open and glanced back at the sink cabinet. What if Samuel looked for the books before she snuck them back in?

It was worth the risk. She needed to know. Samuel had been chair of the finance committee since before she was born. A few years ago, Lydia had been voted onto the committee to help as the church grew. That was before the newspaper had to lay her off, and she started working at Starbucks.

Emma pushed the door open and walked to the press room.

“You okay?” Samuel asked.

Emma held her finger up. “Nothing some cold water and a bandage can’t fix. Thanks, Sam.”

Samuel walked over to her and held his greasy hands up. “Just glad you’re okay.” She wrapped her arms around him and squeezed. He grunted, awkwardly holding his hands away. “I love you, Emma. No matter what. Please, remember that.”

“I love you, too, old man” Emma said as she released him.

“I know. I’m way too lovable.”

Emma smiled. “That you are, Samuel Wheat.”



29 *Bathroom Break*

AFTER MERNA HELPED THROW THE LAST OF THE BUNDLES into the back of the truck, she handed Emma a piece of paper with a crude map. “You sure you’re good with this?”

“Yeah. We got it.”

“Nice meetin’ you, Zack. I’ll have to come in early more often.” She patted the fender and got in her old station wagon.

Emma and Zachary got in the truck. Emma sat until Merna’s car took a corner. She turned to Zack. “I should use the bathroom before we go. You need to? It’s gonna be a bit before we’re home.”

Zachary nodded. “Probably should.”

Emma grabbed her backpack. “Let’s go.”

When they went back in, Samuel wasn’t sitting at his desk. They walked in the office, and Emma stopped, staring at the light sneaking out under the restroom door. She swung the pack off her shoulder and held it in front of her, tapping her foot. *Was there toilet paper on the roll?* She didn’t go, so she

didn't even look. *What'll Samuel think if he reaches under the sink?* She shifted her weight.

"Are you okay?" Zachary asked.

"Why?"

He pointed to her twitching leg.

She stopped and shifted her weight again. The restroom light shut off, and the door swung open. Samuel walked out, rubbing his hands on a paper towel. He looked up. "Oh, I thought you two had left." He held the door open with his foot and tossed the crumpled towel through the door.

Emma smiled tightly. "Wanted to use the restroom first." She slid past him and snapped the door shut.

Samuel looked at the door then back at Zachary. "Good idea, I suppose." He settled into his wooden desk chair. "So, Zack. I've been thinkin'. You been spendin' a lot of time here lately."

"I enjoy it."

In the bathroom, Emma flushed the toilet then turned on the faucet for cover as she quickly reached for the ledgers and stuffed them in her backpack. She stood and reached for the doorknob, but stopped when she heard voices.

Sam rubbed his chin. "Enjoy it here, or enjoy being around our little girl?" He nodded toward the door.

Zachary smiled. He did like working in the old building with ancient machinery. It made him feel useful. But would he enjoy it if Emma Louise Green wasn't around? "Both, I think."

"Yes. You do like her. I can tell."

"I do, Sam."

Emma rested her head on the inside of the restroom door and smiled.

Samuel glanced at the door then lowered his voice. "And she likes you."

"You think?"

“Plain as day,” Samuel said quietly. “She’s been better since you showed up. I think you’re just what she’s been needin’. You may not know it, but our girl’s had a rough time of late with her mother and the whole business with her father.”

Emma sucked in a breath and opened the door. As she stepped out, she looked at the two. “What have you two been talking about?”

“Don’t look at me,” Samuel said. “You know I’m not much of a talker.”

She swung her pack onto her shoulder, walked to the other desk, and sat down. She looked at Zachary. “Your turn.”

“Oh, yeah.” He headed to the restroom then closed the door and stared in the mirror.

Emma slid her chair to Samuel, grabbed his arm, and spun him towards her. When he looked up, she whispered, “What do you think you’re doing, Samuel Wheat?” He smiled. “You knew I could hear?”

Samuel’s eyes gleamed as he whispered, “We all know you need something good in your life right now.” Emma blanched. “You came back to life the minute that boy came around.” He turned his chair back to his desk and put his pen to the paper he was marking up. “I just didn’t want you to miss it.”

As Emma stared at Samuel’s profile, she felt her eyes well up. A tear snaked down her cheek. “I love you, Sam.”

He glanced at her then focused back on his work. “What’s not to love?”

Emma laughed. She heard the toilet flush and the faucet turn on, so she straightened and wiped her eyes. When the door opened, she stood. “You ready?”

“Yeah,” Zachary responded; then, the two of them walked out of the office.

Emma glanced over her shoulder as Samuel looked up. The two shared a smile before she turned by the paper stacks.

When they got to the truck, Emma climbed in and wiped her eyes once more before Zachary got in and closed the door.

“Is everything okay?” he asked.

After shifting to reverse and backing up, she smiled at Zachary “I’m good.” Then, they drove out to finish Merna’s route.



30 *Another Guest*

EMMA TURNED THE KEY, AND THE PAPER BOX FELL OPEN. “Got it,” she said as she reached both hands to take the last bundle from Zachary. She loaded the stack, grabbed the top paper, and slid it into the display window before snapping the lid shut. She stood and brushed her hands several times. “I don’t know about you, but I’m exhausted.”

Zachary wiped his arm across his forehead. “She does this everyday?”

“Six days a week. She’s tougher than she looks.” They exchanged a smile and took their places in the truck. “I’ll drop you off at home.”

“You’re coming in, right?” Zachary asked.

“Can’t today. I’ve got some things to do.” She put the truck in gear and did a U-turn.

“Hope Claire doesn’t see you. She won’t be happy if you don’t come in.”

Emma smiled. “She’s so sweet. Tell you what... if I finish early, I’ll come by.”

Zachary smirked and watched the road as she pulled into his neighborhood. "If she doesn't see you."

Emma slowed as she approached a stop sign when a red Mustang screeched around the corner. The car swerved, and Emma slammed the brakes, just missing the sports car. "Idiot, Grays," she muttered.

"You know them?" Zachary craned his neck to see the car speeding down the street before taking another corner.

"Everyone does," she said flatly. "That's Blake's car. The other guy in front was Brad. I didn't see the others, but it's likely more jocks."

"Blake? As in Blake Gray?"

"Yeah," she said as she headed toward Zachary's house. "Inspiration's over-privileged at their worst." She sat up in her seat and leaned forward. "What's going on up there?"

Zachary looked and sat up. "Pull over."

Emma angled toward the sidewalk and hit the brakes.

He jumped out before the truck stopped and ran toward a curled body surrounded by books and notebook paper blowing in the breeze. "Ben!" The body curled tighter, and Zachary knelt down. "Ben! Are you okay?"

Emma ran around and dropped to her knees in the spring grass. "Did Blake and Brad do this?" Her hands curled into tight fists, and she looked down the street.

Ben covered his face with his arm and buried his head in the cool, manicured lawn. "I'm fine. Leave me alone."

"Ben," Zachary said. "You're not fine. Let me help you." He grabbed Ben's arm, but Ben ripped it away.

"We're not leaving you here," Emma said. "Let us help." She reached for the backpack that was splayed open then gathered some papers and stuffed them inside.

"I said I'm fine!" Ben shouted as he sat up and snatched the pack from her. "Leave me alone!"

"Oh, my gosh," Emma said as she reached for his chin. "You're bleeding."

Ben pulled away. "I can take care of myself." He reached for one of his textbooks and pulled back, wrapping an arm around his midsection.

Zachary snatched the bag from him. "Of course you can. We're helping you anyway." He looked at Emma and handed her the bag. She crawled around gathering Ben's belongings while Zachary pulled him up and slung Ben's arm over his shoulder.

Ben let out a grunt. "I don't need your help."

"I know," Zachary responded. "But what else are cousins for?" He walked Ben to the truck and helped him onto the bench seat. Ben released a broken sigh as he slid toward the center. Zachary sat next to him and left one foot on the pavement as he watched Emma finish chasing Ben's loose papers and stuff them into the backpack. While he watched Emma walk toward the truck, he turned to Ben and asked, "Anne's boyfriend find out?"

Ben smiled through the pain and nodded. "His stupid brother did."

"Was it worth it?"

"Yeah."

They both smiled as Emma dropped the pack in the truck bed and climbed in.

"They're not getting away with this," Emma said as she clenched the steering wheel. She looked at them, and they both tried to straighten their faces. "This is funny?"

They both laughed, and Ben held his ribs and moaned. "No," they said simultaneously.

Emma tilted her head. "I'll never understand boys." She maneuvered into the street then pulled to the curb in front of their house. Zachary got out, and Emma ran around to help. Ben slid out, and both of them made like human crutches easing him up the walk.

From behind them, a young voice called out, "Ben! Oh, my gosh! What happened?" A girl ran in front of them, and

they stopped. “Did Ash do this? Oh, man. We’re *so* broke up! Look at you. You’re bleeding.” She wrapped her arms around Ben, causing him to flinch. “Oh. I’m sorry. Does it hurt?” She looked him over. “Stupid question. Of course it hurts.” She clutched her fists tight. “He is so dead,” she fumed, slowly enunciating each word.

“It wasn’t him, Annie,” Ben said. She stopped dead and stared at him. He looked down. “It was his brother. The varsity guys.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “That’s worse! He gets his brother to do his dirty work!”

Emma said, “We need to get him inside.”

“Oh, yeah. Let’s bring him in.” Anne started backing toward the house.

They helped him to the porch, and Anne turned to open the door. Zachary said, “We got it from here. Thanks.”

“I’m not leaving him now,” Anne said as she marched inside the demon house and turned around.

Zachary looked at Ben and quietly said, “Looks like we have another guest.”

“William’s gonna love this.” The slight smirk on Ben’s face told Zachary he wasn’t hating the idea of having Anne Carmine in his house.

Zachary put his lips to Ben’s ear. “This is a bad idea.”

Claire jumped up from the breakfast nook and said, “Who’s here?” She ran over. “What happened, Ben? Did you fall down?”

Zachary saw Bethany sitting at the table. She looked at Anne and rolled her eyes.

“I sure did, Claire Bear,” Ben said.

Claire looked him over and said, “It must have been a big fall. Does it hurt?”

“A little.”

“Can I kiss it?” Claire asked. “That makes my hurts better.”

“I would like that.”

“Where does it hurt?”

Ben held his hand out. Claire put her cheek in his palm and gently rubbed her face. She looked up at him as she slowly kissed his palm twice. He smiled. “Thank you. It feels better now.”

Claire smiled and looked at Anne. “Is this your girlfriend?”

Bethany slowly strolled in to join the festivities and looked the newcomer over. Anne was small, maybe five-foot-two, wearing hot pink tennis shoes, footy socks, a matching hot pink half shirt, which showed off a tight stomach, and black workout pants. There’s no doubt she was cute. No wonder Ben liked her.

“So who’s our unexpected guest?” Bethany asked, angling her head toward Ben. If she noticed his dirty and bloodied state, she didn’t show it.

“Oh.” Anne turned to Bethany. “I’m Anne. I live—”

“Across the street,” Bethany interrupted. “I know. What are you doing here?”

Anne blanched. Clearly she wasn’t used to being treated as an unwelcome guest. “I’m here for Ben,” she said with a frown. She looked into the kitchen then walked up to him and took his hand. “Come on. Let’s get you cleaned up.”

Ben took her hand; then, he hobbled to the table and sat down. Anne started going through the drawers then looked up. “Where are the towels?”

Claire ran to the kitchen and said, “I’ll help. They’re in here.”

Emma looked at Zack. “I’d better help.” She went to the kitchen.

Zachary’s eyes burned into Bethany’s. “Be nice.”

She humphed and said, “I’m always nice.”

“Is William here?”

“No. He had business.” She looked at the group washing and bandaging Ben. “You better get her out of here before he gets back.”

Suddenly, the garage door began rumbling.  
Bethany smiled. “Too late.”



31 *Four Briefcases*

THE DOOR TO THE GARAGE SWUNG OPEN AND EVERYBODY looked up. William backed in, holding several bags in his arms. Bethany smirked at Zachary as she waited for the ball to drop. William stumbled slightly before catching his balance.

Anne ran to him. “Here, let me help with those.” She took one of the bags.

William turned and said, “Oh. Thank you.”

She smiled. “Glad to help.” Grimacing at the weight, she asked, “Where do you want it?”

William nodded toward the counter. “There’s fine.”

She lifted the bag and slid it onto the counter with a grunt. “Geez. What do you have in these? Books?”

William slid the other two bags next to hers and let out a breath. “Sort of.” She wrinkled her forehead, so he explained, “Paper.”

“Oh, that’s kind of weird.”

“It’s for a project,” William said. He looked at Ben, took in his state, then back at the new girl.

“Okay. That makes sense.” She reached out her hand. “My name’s Anne. Anne Carmine.” She motioned her thumb over her shoulder. “From across the street.”

William smiled as he released her hand. “Of course. Welcome to our house, Anne. It’s nice to finally meet you.” Anne beamed at William as he looked around her toward Ben. “Is he okay?”

Anne continued smiling for a long second then jumped. “Oh.” She ran over to Ben and put both hands on his cheeks. “Does it hurt?” Ben nodded, so she held his head against her chest and caressed his neck. “Poor baby.”

Bethany wrinkled her lip. “Give me a break.” She looked up at William who was carrying another heavy bag. “William, Emma *and* Anne are here.”

“I see that, Beth,” he said as he walked toward his office. “Make them feel at home.” He looked at Zachary. “Give me a hand with these?” Emma and Zachary stood. Emma went to pick up one of the bags, but William said, “Thanks, Emma, but I just need Zack. Plus, we have some things to talk about.”

“Oh.” Emma lowered her arms.

Zachary leaned in and kissed her. “I’ll be right back.” He motioned toward Ben who was grinning and nuzzling his head in Anne’s chest. “You should stay with Ben.”

Emma gave a tight grin. “I think he’s doing just fine.” She watched Zachary grab two of the bags, easily lift them off the counter, and follow William.

“You really like him, don’t you?” Bethany asked.

Emma spun and faced her. She thought for a second then smiled. “Is that okay?”

“Depends.”

Emma tilted her head. “On what? Does he have like a crazy ex or something?”

Bethany pursed her lips. "That's one thing you'll never have to worry about."

"No way," Anne piped up. "You're Zack's first girlfriend?"

Emma looked at Bethany who crossed her arms and raised her eyebrows. "You're not serious?"

Bethany held her stare.

William pointed at the floor behind his desk, and Zachary dropped the bags.

"Is this what I think it is?" Zachary asked.

William reached into a cabinet, pulled out four different styles of briefcases, and placed them on his desk. He picked up one of the bags, unzipped it, and held a bundle up. "A bundle is twenty thousand dollars. The bundles hold ten straps each. A strap is two thousand dollars. You'll have to break the straps to fit them in the briefcases. Put a hundred thousand in each case. Understand?"

"You sure they'll fit?" He broke a bundle and started stacking bills in one of the cases.

William worked on one of the others, stacking the bills neatly. "You can actually fit around \$150,000 worth of twenties in one of these." Zachary raised an eyebrow, and William said, "Don't ask."

"I know these are for the Warden and the two officers. Who gets this one?"

William stopped and looked up. "To pull this off, we'll need all of us there, including Claire and Sarah."

Zachary froze. "Claire's mother is alive? You said you lost her."

William paused. He took a deep breath then continued stacking the money. "I said I lost her. I didn't say she was dead." William looked at Zachary. "Keep stacking."

Zachary shook his head as he started working again. "Does Claire know?"

"She's the only one."

“She knows? What’d you tell her?”

“I didn’t tell her anything. Her mom did. On one of our visits.”

Zachary stopped. “You see her? Where?”

William stared at him. “Keep working, Zack.”

Zachary closed the first case and moved on to another. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“She’s at Saint Catherine’s,” William responded, watching Zachary’s reaction. Zachary stopped and pulled his brows together. William continued, “In the next town. It’s a psychiatric hospital.” William smiled. “They think she’s schizophrenic. I guess, technically, she is. I mean, she definitely has multiple personalities. We all do if we let them back in.”

Zachary looked at William. “Wait. We, as in all of us?”

William smirked. “You don’t think that boy just stopped existing when you took over? He’s still in there, Zack. If you let him, he can come back. Of course, you’d have to learn to share.” William pointed to the case. “Finish up. I need to drop one off tonight.”

Zachary tried to concentrate on counting, but his head was swimming. He’d never thought about whom this body belonged to before him. *He was still inside him? How did he not know?*

When they finished up, William stuck three of the cases in a cabinet and held one at his side. “Get back to Emma. Take care of Claire. I’ll be back in a couple of hours. We’ll let Ben and Beth know tonight. Do me a favor and don’t tell them anything. I’ll tell them myself. I owe them that.” He walked out of the room and out the front door without stopping.

Zachary walked down the hallway and looked at the group of teenagers in the kitchen then sighed. He thought he wanted Ben and Bethany to know everything, but he

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wasn't sure how they would take it. Maybe William was right. Maybe keeping them in the dark was safer.



32 *Decision Made*

“THERE YOU ARE,” EMMA SAID AS SHE WALKED TO ZACHARY and slid her arm around his waist. Her ears perked at the slight sound of the garage door rumbling. “Is William leaving?”

“Awe,” Anne said. “He didn’t say goodbye.” Her lower lip stuck out.

“Oh, yeah. Sorry,” Zachary responded. “He had to go somewhere.”

“It’s okay, I guess,” Anne said with an easy smile. “I’ll see him when he gets back.”

“Um.” Bethany’s lip raised. “You probably shouldn’t be here when he gets back.”

Anne narrowed her stare. “William said to make me feel at home. I think I’ll stay.” She held Ben’s head to her chest and looked into his eyes. “If that’s okay with you.”

Ben looked at her and said, “You kidding? If it’s okay with William, you can stay as long as you want.” He turned to Bethany. “He did say it, Beth.”

“I think it’s a great idea,” Emma said, and the two girls shared a smile.

Bethany furrowed her brow at Zachary. He shrugged, and she crossed her arms and sighed. “Not a good idea.” She walked out and up the stairs.

Emma watched her and quietly asked, “Is she okay?”

As Bethany turned the corner, he answered, “She’ll be fine.” He watched Ben and Anne for a moment then turned to Emma. “She’s probably right. Not that it matters anymore.”

Emma slid her other arm around Zachary and slowly eased into a kiss. Zachary pulled her in and a slight moan escaped from his core. An involuntary reaction. He’d watched humans kiss for centuries and never understood the purpose. Mouths, tongues, and spit intermingling. It had all seemed immeasurably disgusting. But this—the feel, the warmth, the taste of Emma—would be what he’d miss the most when his commission was over, most likely ending in a humiliating failure.

She pulled away and drew a breath. “I have to go.”

“You sure?” he asked as he pulled her back in.

She quickly kissed him then pulled away. “I really have to.” She slipped away and put her hand on the door handle. “I have to do some research and return something before it gets too late.”

Zachary ached at the prospect of losing any more of the time he had left with her. “Maybe I can help?”

“I have to go home and... you and Dad didn’t really...” She shook her head.

“I promise I’ll be good.” He held his right hand over his heart.

“It’s not you I’m worried about.”

Zachary imitated Anne’s pout. “You don’t want to be with me?”

Emma rolled her eyes. “Fine. If you’re gonna be a baby about it, you can come.” He smiled. She looked at Anne and

Ben snuggling their noses. “Is it a good idea to leave them alone?”

Zachary met her eyes. “Trust me. Ben won’t let anything happen.”

“Ooookay.” Emma elongated the word and opened the door.

“Are you guys leaving too?” Anne asked.

Zachary looked at Ben. “I have to help Emma with something.” He motioned toward the stairs. “Beth’s here if you need anything.”

Anne smiled and waved. She turned to Ben. “I heard you have an awesome pool. Can we go in?”

Ben’s eyes flashed, and a broad smile crept over his face. “Absolutely.”

“Awesome!” Anne jumped up. “Wait here! I have to get my bikini.” She squeezed past Emma and trotted down the walk toward her house.

Ben jumped up and ran to the door, watching her skip across the street with a dreamy grin.

Emma reached out and touched his bandages. “You probably shouldn’t be in the pool.” He flinched, and she said, “The chemicals will probably sting.”

Ben watched the cute little blonde blow a kiss from her porch and disappear inside. He looked at Emma. “Anne Carmine in a bikini is worth any pain I could ever imagine.” He sprinted upstairs as he said, “Gotta get ready.”

Zachary called out, “Beth’s here—”

“Yeah, yeah. I know,” Ben said as he rounded the corner toward his room.

Emma smiled. “He is *so* cute.” She sounded out each word.

“Who?” Zachary blanched. “Ben?”

Emma walked out. “Yes, Ben.”

Zachary followed her. “I don’t know. I never thought about it.”

Emma walked toward the driver's side, opened the door, and paused. "Typical guy." She climbed in.

Zachary slid in the bench seat. "I'm typical?"

"It's a figure of speech." She leaned over, kissed his cheek, and whispered, "You are anything but," then sat up and turned the key. The engine roared to life; then, she shifted into first gear and turned to look for traffic. She paused as she caught sight of little Anne Carmine trotting across the street wearing flip-flops and a tiny red bikini. She held a thick white towel in one hand, swinging it back and forth with each step.

Anne waved at the two of them as she passed in front of the truck. Both Emma and Zachary watched as she galloped along the walk and up to the porch of the large house. Anne didn't hesitate as she reached for the handle and let herself in.

"You have to admit, she is absolutely adorable," Emma said.

"Maybe too much," Zachary responded.

Emma tilted her head. "How could anyone be too adorable?"

"That's something I ask myself every time I look at you."

Emma looked behind her for traffic and pulled out. "Now you're just being sweet."

"Trust me, I'm not being sweet. It's the truth."

"Whatever." Emma smirked.

Zachary watched the streets blur past. "I'm just saying... when you find true beauty it can make you do things you'd never imagine in thousands of years."

Emma cocked her head. "Thousands of years? Really?" She slowed at an intersection and turned the corner. "Exaggerate much?"

He focused his eyes on Emma's profile as he traced the promise ring in his right pocket. His eyes followed the stubborn lock of hair that continuously refused to be

restrained. With his left hand, he swept the hair into place. Emma's mouth opened slightly; then, she sucked in a quick breath. He knew he had to be cautious with her. Although he wanted to pull his hand away, her skin emitted an intense gravity, drawing him in. As he traced her delicate ear, his entire being surged with electricity. His fingers took control and gently followed her jawline until they landed on her chin.

He swallowed. Zagan was not going to get whatever he needed from this girl. Not if he had anything to do with it. Zachary sighed. "I wish I were, Emma." She shot him a quick glance then focused back on the road. He moved his hand to the back of her neck and marveled at the warmth of her skin and the softness of her hair. "Emma Louise Green, you are the most beautiful woman this world has ever known. Thank you for showing me that."

Emma's eyes glistened. They flitted from the road, to Zachary, to her lap, and back to the road. She swallowed, and her lower lip quivered. She sniffed and pulled the corners of her mouth back as she pulled into the driveway, shut the truck off, and faced Zachary. "I don't deserve you."

"No, Emma." He opened his door, stepped out, and leaned in. "I never want it to come, but soon, you'll see. You deserve way better than me." He closed his door and stood up straight, bracing for whatever greeting Emma's father would have on their second meeting. Lord knows the first didn't go well. As he walked around the truck, he reminded himself the worst possible day on Earth is infinitely better than what was waiting for him on the other side.

Emma sat for a few seconds, trying to make sense of Zachary's words. She got out, pulled her overstuffed backpack from the seat, and watched the sweetest boy she'd ever known relieve her of the burden and walk with her up the narrow path. Zachary opened the front door and stepped aside, letting her go first.

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He paused and looked up to see a Whisperer perched above Emma's house. He watched it vanish and reappear on the small railing next to him to peer inside the open door, completely unaware of Zachary's presence.



### 33 *Norman or Norm?*

ZACHARY QUICKLY STEPPED INSIDE THE HOUSE AND SHUT the door, leaving the creature outside. He stood, staring at the white-paneled structure for several seconds, willing himself to remember the last time he'd seen the angels. Though they meant certain destruction, he'd become accustomed to, even comforted by their presence. For as long as he'd known the girl who'd changed his entire being, they'd been there. Not always visible, but always watching.

“Well, go on up, then. No use starin’ at a closed door.”

Zachary jumped and turned to see Mr. Green sitting in his recliner, lifting his glasses. There were several books open, some in his lap, and others facedown over the armrests. The man had an ink pen sticking out of his mouth like a cigar and a legal notepad in his hand. “Emma headed upstairs already. Seemed to be in a hurry.”

Zachary took two steps toward Mr. Green and stopped. “What’re you working on?”

Mr. Green put the legal pad face down on the end table and began picking up the books. "Can't seem to get out of the habit." He stood with a groan and placed the stack of books on the coffee table. He lifted the one off the top and held it up, an old leather-bound Bible. "Two sermons a week. One on Sunday, then the Wednesday night meeting."

He walked over to the kitchen counter and put the Bible down. "Don't know why I still do it. Got a hundred sermons no one'll ever hear." He sighed heavily. "Just the rantings of a tired old man, I guess."

"I'd like to hear," Zachary said without thinking. Mr. Green was surprised, matching Zachary's thoughts. He knew of sermons. God's way of speaking to the modern world. Surely, the words would have no meaning to a separated soul, but he wanted to hear from the man that meant so much to Emma Louise Green, the most guarded soul in Inspiration.

Mr. Green tilted his head. "Awe." He flicked his wrist. "You don't have to."

"I really do want to hear, Mr. Green."

The man raised his chin and stared at the boy through the lenses of his bifocals. He put his hand out. "You can stop with all the 'Mr. Green' nonsense. The name's Norman." Zachary took his hand. "My friend's call me Norm." He released Zachary's hand. "You can call me Norman."

"Zack," Emma called from the top of the stairs. She pointed at him. "I need my bag."

"Oh, sorry," Zachary looked back at Norman Green and hiked the bag higher on his shoulder.

"Go on, then." Zachary smiled and started walking. He stopped as the man planted a hand on Zachary's chest. Mr. Green leaned in close. "I've lost everything. My little girl's all I have left." The man pulled away. "Understand?"

Zachary nodded. He understood more than the man could ever know. Mr. Green had no idea that Lucifer himself was conspiring against his baby girl, and Zachary was the

only thing between the forces of the Fallen and her. He nodded and Mr. Green—Norman—dropped his hand.

Zachary ran up the stairs then followed Emma into a bedroom. He'd been in the room before, but it looked much different than the time he stood next to Zagan. The setting sunlight was streaming in through a window next to her bed, casting a warm glow. His nostrils filled with the scent of Emma. Floral, spring, clean, and fresh.

She pulled her bag off Zachary's shoulder and put it on her bed; then, she unzipped it, pulled the ledgers out, and opened them on her desk.

"Your dad seems nice," he said as he walked around her room, which was immaculately clean.

Emma stopped and looked up. "You're talking about the guy downstairs, right? The one who threw you on the ground?"

"Yeah, Norman. We were talking and—"

"Don't tell me he gave you his 'My friends call me Norm' speech?" She air-quoted.

"Yeah."

Emma rolled her eyes. "You should've seen Blake when he gave him that speech. Totally freaked him out."

"Wait, Blake Gray?"

Emma's head popped up, open-mouthed. She sighed heavily. "I don't want to talk about him. Okay?"

Zachary shrugged. "Okay." It wasn't okay. For some reason, it burned in him. The thought of Blake Gray being anywhere near Emma hurt.

He felt Emma's hand on his. "Zack, don't worry. I don't like him anymore."

*Anymore?* She did like him.

She worked her hand into his. He hadn't realized his fists had clenched. Blake was an arrogant bully who had no business trying to be with such an amazing girl. Zachary

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knew he had no future with Emma and Blake Gray most certainly wouldn't either.



34 *A Cloud Over Inspiration*

ZACHARY SAT ON THE BENCH SEAT, WATCHING THE streetlights flash across Emma's face as she tucked the stubborn lock behind her ear. He wished he could promise her everything would be all right. If there was anyone who could make it okay, it wasn't him. He had nothing to offer. His entire purpose for finding his way into her life was her destruction. Now, he feared it was actually happening.

Emma wiped a tear from her cheek as she pulled in front of William's house. She looked at him and said, "Thank you for being here, Zack." When she put her hand on his, it felt like a knife in his gut. "I mean it." She leaned in, cupped his cheek in her hand, and planted the softest kiss like a whisper on his lips.

Behind his closed eyes, his mind raced. He didn't exactly comprehend all she'd found in the ledgers and Internet searches, but he did understand betrayal. His realm existed on it. For centuries, he'd expected, even used it to put an end to those in positions he'd envied. Zagan's cruel voice echoed in

his head, "Be sure of where your allegiances lie." Allegiances? He hadn't thought how foreign the concept really was.

There were never any true allegiances in his realm. Only a means to an end. You would merely go through the motions until you got what was desired. Once achieved, no expectations of loyalty persisted. A thousand scarred faces filled with hate and betrayal flashed through his mind of those he'd once pledged loyalty only to betray them when they were no longer required.

Slowly, he opened his eyes as Emma gently brushed her nose over his. His breath caught as he thought of the hurt he would bring these eyes when she finally knew who and what he was. She would never know how he would suffer for her. She would never know the torment his future held simply because knowing her changed his world. He would have to remember and endure her betrayal above all else.

"I couldn't get through this without you," she said as she pulled away.

"It doesn't make sense," Zachary responded. "I could see Coal doing this, but Sam? He's your friend." The thought of Samuel's face filled his heart with rage.

Emma twisted her hands in her lap and looked down. "Daddy always says you never really know what drives people."

Zachary nodded. "Trust me, I usually see exactly who or what drives people. Coal's, like most of this town, is plain as day, but I didn't see any around Sam."

Emma looked up and asked, "See any what?"

Zachary looked out the passenger window. Of course, that sentence wouldn't make sense to Emma. Anyone in his house aside from Claire would've known exactly what he was talking about. "Let's just say, I'm a pretty good judge of people." He looked at her. "Kind of an... extra sense." Emma looked at him sideways. "Never mind. How did you know to check the ledgers?"

Emma raised her chin. “Oh, that.” She twisted toward him in the seat. “It had to do with what Daddy said.”

Zachary turned toward her. His shoulders had relaxed when she dropped the “extra sense” thing.

“He said that Liddy told him the insurance would cover it,” Emma explained. “Back when Liddy worked with her dad at the paper, she used to help Sam with the church books. Sam’s done the church accounting since before I was born. He knows business stuff, so he’s always been the obvious choice.” She shook her head. “When Mom first started getting sick, I found Liddy in the church crying. When I asked what was wrong she said something about ‘self-insuring’ and how they’d pay it back. She told me she would ‘figure it out,’ and ‘not to worry.’ She said she and her father loved us, and they’d take care of everything. She promised Mom would get the best medical treatment. I was only sixteen, so I literally had no idea what she was talking about. With Mom being sick and seeing how Dad was falling apart, I really didn’t care about anything but keeping my family together.

“When we came home from Mom’s funeral, the news cameras were at our house, asking about the missing building funds.” Emma focused on her fidgeting hands. “Dad and I had no idea what they were talking about. ‘Small Town Pastor Cleans Out Building Fund’ and ‘Betrayal from the Pulpit’ were plastered all over the news for weeks. That’s when Heath stepped in to—supposedly—help out.”

“Pastor Coal?” Zachary asked.

“Yeah,” Emma huffed. “The ‘good pastor Coal’ stepped in.” A line formed between Emma’s eyes. “He wasn’t always a jerk. The church hired him straight out of seminary a few years ago. He was eager and always super nice to me. Daddy and him were best friends, so he trusted Heath. I trusted him.

“When the checks with my father’s signature surfaced, he stood up for us, saying, ‘We at Inspiration Community

Church know there is a reasonable explanation, and we will stand behind Pastor Green.’ Heath convinced the prosecutors and the church that an investigation would be detrimental to our fragile town. He promised he would temporarily assume the church leadership until he could convince everyone to let Daddy come back.”

Emma’s lip quivered. “At first, people were supportive. They’d say things like, ‘If you’d have asked, we would’ve helped.’ But a few months ago, everything changed. It was like a dark cloud floated over all of Inspiration. Blake dumped me. Our neighbors wouldn’t talk to us. The church went cold. Even Heath stopped coming over. Then, there’s the thing he said yesterday when he didn’t know we were listening. I’m telling you, something strange is going on in this town.”

Emma watched Zachary’s eyes as he studied her face. She hadn’t had someone listen to her with such intensity since the young seminary graduate practically joined the family. Something about Zachary made her feel safe. She opened her mouth, then quickly closed it and bit her lip.

“What?” Zachary asked.

Emma drew her shoulders in and looked down. “Never mind. It’s nothing.” She looked at him without raising her head. “I don’t know why I told you all of that. You didn’t even ask.”

“Emma, please.” Zachary reached for her hands and squeezed. “You can tell me anything. I want you to.” Her jaw tensed, and she swallowed. His heart raced, knowing she wanted to tell him something important. Each second felt like an eternity as her forehead flexed and relaxed. “Please, Emma. What are you afraid of?”

“Okay.” She took a deep breath. “You know how I said something strange is going on in Inspiration?”

Zachary’s arms tightened, and he slightly nodded.

Emma pulled her left hand from his grip and rubbed the back of her neck as she looked in his eyes. “I’ve been

hearing things. Not like voices. I'm not schizo. Well, I don't think I am. More like, I feel them." She looked at his face then dropped her eyes. "I'm sorry. You must think I'm totally insane."

Zachary reached his free hand out and lifted her chin until her eyes met his. "You're not crazy. You're human." He smiled. "Trust me... everyone feels like that."

Emma smiled weakly. "Really?"

Zachary cupped her cheek. "Let me know if the voices start talking. Then maybe we've got a problem."

Emma chuckled hesitantly. She looked at this perfect boy and wondered how he knew exactly what to say.

"So tell me," Zachary said. "This voice you feel..."

Emma narrowed her eyes. "Yeah?"

"She wouldn't happened to be sarcastic, selfish, degrading, and slightly perverted?"

Emma tilted her head and parted her lips.

"Push those thoughts out. They come from somewhere else. Stay you."

Emma straightened her head.

"Except the perverted one." Zachary smiled. "I like that one."

Emma smiled and pushed his shoulder. "Shut up." Her face straightened. "Seriously though. You need to know, I'm not usually so..."

Zachary pulled her into a warm kiss then looked in her eyes. He released her and opened the door. "I'm not complaining." He stepped out and leaned his head in. "Just be Emma Louise Green. You control you; no one else. Okay?"

Emma smiled and nodded.

Zachary shut the door, and Emma pulled the truck away. After watching her turn the corner, he faced the large house. As he saw the curtains fall shut, he shook his head, mumbling, "Get out of her head, Bethany." He tried to look at the bright light hovering over the house, but had to turn

*Inspiration*

away. He could never make out the form of Claire's guardian, but knowing the being was there protecting the young girl was comforting.



35 *Daughter of Inspiration*

EMMA PARKED THE TRUCK A BLOCK AWAY FROM THE TOWN square and walked toward the newspaper building. She slung her backpack over her shoulder as she stared at the darkened street. When she stepped onto the sidewalk, she stopped. She'd never realized the red "Know Your Future" sign from the local fortuneteller shop across the street projected a dark shadowy figure on the side of the building.

Her heart quickened. Something had changed in Inspiration. After taking another step forward, she realized the shadow was her. "Calm down, Emma," she whispered. "Stop freaking yourself out." She crossed the street and headed toward the alley to the rear door. While she was stopped in the darkened corridor, she wished she'd accepted Samuel's offer for a key to the front.

Samuel had said, "Just take it, Emma. You practically live here anyway."

"Everything I do is back here, Sam," She told him.

“Why would I ever need in the front?” she said, mocking herself as she walked. Her footfalls echoed off the hard brick walls lining the alley. She reached the back door, slid her key in the lock, and turned it. As she went inside, she flipped a switch and waited for the fluorescents to flicker on before heading towards Samuel’s darkened office. She hurried in and replaced the ledgers.

She stood in the office and ran her hand over the leather back of Samuel’s chair. She knew he’d setup the shell companies and had been using them to siphon off money from the church, but he must’ve had a good reason. “What made you do it, Sam?”

She noticed an envelope corner protruding from Samuel’s desk calendar, so she pulled it out. Handwritten on the sealed envelope were the words, “Jasper Creek Enrichment Center.” That name had been in the ledger. It was one of the companies that had no web presence, so she had no way of telling if it was one of the fake companies Samuel had created.

She slid it back under the calendar and noticed two more envelopes. “Willow Creek Funding” and “Lonesome Hands Ministries” were written on them. Two more names she recognized. She pulled a Post-it off the stack, wrote down the names, and replaced the envelopes. After putting the pen back and studying the desk, she wondered if anyone would be able to tell she’d disturbed it. Her mind was running too fast to remember where everything was. She shook her head, walked out of the office, and headed toward the back door.

She flipped the light off and reached for the handle. As she grabbed it, she felt a vibration and pulled away. Her breath caught as the knob turned. The door swung open, but the dim light from outside kept the dark figure a secret as an arm reached around and caught the light switch.

The light flickered, and Emma jumped back as she saw an old, scarred face with bright yellow eyes. She screamed,

and the lights flicked once more, revealing a figure with no face at all. She backed against the racks and a printing plate crashed to the floor.

As the figure backed out of the door, she heard a man shout, "Who's in here?"

When the lights finally settled, Emma recognized the face in the doorway. "Heath? What are you doing here?"

Heath stepped into the building holding his chest. "Emma Louise, you scared the living daylights out of me."

"Answer my question. Why are you here?"

Heath put his hand down and said, "I might ask you the same question."

"I work here." Emma crossed her arms. "What about you?"

"Not that it's any of your business, but I help out with some charities in this and nearby towns," Heath said as he straightened his suit jacket. "Sometimes, it calls for late pickup and delivery hours."

"At the newspaper?"

"My good work takes me to all locations needing a helping hand."

"I'm sure it does." She felt a chilly breeze from the open door, and she pulled her arms tight across her chest.

"I'm sorry," Heath said. "You're chilled." He let the door close, but his thoughtful gesture made her feel as if she were entombed within the cold walls of the bindery. Heath stepped toward her, holding his hand out. "I wouldn't want for you to feel... uncomfortable."

Emma smiled tightly and swallowed. "Thank you, but I'd better get back to Daddy."

"It's a shame what he's been going through." Heath clucked his tongue. Emma felt a cool breeze brush her shoulder, and she flinched. As she walked toward the door, Heath reached for her. She ducked his attempt and reached

for the handle, but froze when Heath said, “You know, Emma. I could make it all go away.”

Emma leaned her forehead against the door and breathed in short breaths. “You can do that?” Her words felt like they rested on the metal surface an inch from her mouth. Why was the spring night so cold?

She remembered the first time she’d seen Heath. He was so handsome and kind. Her entire freshman year was spent fantasizing about the day she’d be old enough to tell him how she felt, how they’d be married, and how she would watch proudly each Sunday as he led a small town congregation through communion.

“It could all stop tomorrow,” Heath said. “It’s up to you, Emma.”

Emma felt a cool breeze ride up her back as she faced the door. “Me?” She heard him take a step forward, and she raised her head, letting the tip of her nose run along the cool metal.

“It’s always been up to you,” Heath said as he stepped closer. Her jaw quivered as she felt his hand brush her hair off her shoulder. He grazed the exposed skin with the back of his fingers. “You’ve grown quite beautiful, Emma.”

Her gut retched. She turned her head and laid her cheek on the metal. “Daddy can be pastor again?”

Heath turned his hand over, placed it on her shoulder, and gently squeezed. “Let’s not go that far. Your daddy’s reputation has been tarnished, but”—Heath brushed his lips across her skin—“I could stop all his work problems. Who knows,”—he kissed her shoulder—“maybe a good word from me could land him a job in Jasper Creek.”

Emma spun and faced Heath, forcing a smile. “You’d do that for us?” She struggled to hold down the bile creeping up her throat as she slid her hands around his waist.

Heath smiled salaciously. He slid his hands down her waist and stretched his fingers over her hips. When she

looked into his eyes, he smiled and pressed himself against her. "I've never told you, Emma, but you have the most potential of any girl in Inspiration." He breathed into her ear. She turned her head, clenched her lips, and tightened her grip on him. He pressed his lips against her cheek. "You could really make a difference if you want."

"What do I have to do?"

"Nothing you haven't always wanted." He leaned down and touched his lips to hers. "Brooke and Celeste told me all about the plans you had for us." Her lips quivered as he brushed his nose over hers. "You're so beautiful, Emma. In fact, you've always been my favorite. I'll make you the Daughter of Inspiration." He planted his mouth on hers. "We'll need to keep it private for now," he said before he planted another gentle kiss. "You understand. Girls can be so jealous."

Emma shuddered and pushed him away, smiling tightly. "Okay. But not here." Heath turned his head slightly. "It has to be special. Can I pick the place?"

Heath smiled broadly. "Absolutely. Tonight?"

"Don't rush it." Emma touched her finger to his lips. She smiled, drawing her finger down his chin, his neck, his chest, and resting it on his lower stomach. She slid her thigh between his legs and pressed it against him until he gently rocked his hips. She placed her hands on his chest and nudged him away and said, "I pick the time."

Heath stepped away and looked down her body. "I like a girl who takes control. When?"

"Soon," Emma said as she reached behind her and turned the doorknob. She stepped toward him, pulling the metal door with her. "Let me set it up. Trust me. It'll be worth the wait." She leaned forward and touched her lips to his before slipping out the door and letting it close with a gentle click.

She shivered as she ran through the alley. When she reached her truck, she fumbled with the keys before finally

finding the right one. She swung the door open, jumped in the seat, and shut it, sealing herself in. She hit both locks and struggled with the ignition, finally feeling relief when it roared to life.

Emma burst into tears and screamed as the streetlights flashed by. She pounded on the steering wheel. Why did she never see him for the snake he was? How could she have ever liked him? What the hell was up with Celeste and Brooke? Her best friends? That is until they—along with the rest of the town—bailed on her and her father.

Emma slammed on the brakes, and the truck skidded to a stop on the dark street. “Damn it!” she screamed as she stomped her feet and slammed her fist against the roof of the truck, causing the visor to fall open. A stream of papers floated down, landing on the seat next to her.

She gripped the steering wheel and tried to calm herself. When she glanced down, staring up at her was a full color picture of Heath with the caption, “Pastor Coal Welcomes You to Inspiration Community Church, where community, life, and love come together.” Emma snatched the paper, crumpled it, and threw it on the floor.

She noticed a flyer sitting on the seat next to her. *New building dedication. Join us in a night of prayer and celebration at the new site.* She picked it up. “This Friday.” She rocked her head back and stared at the ceiling. “That’s it, then. Friday night, Heath.” She stared into the night. “Forgive me, Daddy.”



36 *A Homecoming Party*

ZACHARY WALKED IN THE DOOR TO FACE BETHANY. “YOU need to stop messing with Emma, Beth.” She turned toward him, but the face he saw was not Bethany’s. This woman had unkempt blonde hair and was wearing an open robe with pajamas and tennis shoes.

Claire peeked from behind her. “How come Emma didn’t come in? I wanted Mommy to meet her too.”

“Nice first impression,” Bethany said from behind him.

Zachary spun to see Bethany sitting in the library. Ben stood behind her with his arms crossed. Bethany raised her palms. “By the way... wish granted.”

William walked to the pajama-clad woman and slid his arm around her waist, pulling her close as Claire held her hand. Zachary looked at William, the woman, and Claire, who looked like the perfect family portrait before turning to Bethany again. He shook his head. “What?”

“Wish granted,” Bethany repeated. “I was pulled from her last night. Apparently, my methods weren’t working fast

enough.” When Zachary didn’t respond, she added, “I was told there was another leader better suited to her situation.” Ben glanced down at Bethany and shifted his weight.

“Zachary,” William said, causing Zachary to turn. “This is Sarah Copper, Claire’s mother.”

Sarah gave a hesitant smile. “Nice to meet you, Zachary.” Claire beamed.

Zachary looked at William. “Did you tell them?” He motioned to the two staring down the back of his head.

“He didn’t tell us anything,” Ben spat. “He just shows up with this woman and announces Claire’s mom is back. I don’t even know what that means. Is there more? Now might be a good time to tell us.”

Bethany remained seated with her arms crossed and her leg nervously twitching. “I am *so* anxious to hear this.” She looked up at William as if he were a child who needed to explain why he’d just been suspended.

Claire scowled at the two of them.

“Let’s all take a seat,” William directed as he guided Sarah to the library by the small of her back. He led her to the loveseat where they both sat with Claire standing by her mom.

Zachary sat down in one of the wingback chairs and put his arms out to Claire. She shook her head, huddling closer to the loveseat. “Come on, Claire. I’m glad I finally get to meet your mom.”

Claire looked at Zachary. “Really?”

Zachary smiled. “Of course.”

William said, “Claire, why don’t you take your mom upstairs and show her your new stuff?”

Claire smiled brightly. “Yeah, come on, Mommy. I got some things for you.”

Sarah stood and reached her hand to Claire. “Really? I’d love to see them.”

William, Zachary, Bethany, and Ben watched silently as the mother and daughter walked out of sight.

Bethany sat up and asked, "What the hell's going on, William? How does Claire have a mother? And where's she been?"

"What's the difference?" Ben threw his arms up. "How can we trust anything you say?"

William put his hands up, silencing Ben. "I'll explain everything. Sarah is Claire's mother from before our commission."

"Do they know about us?" Bethany asked.

"Naamah and I were commissioned together. I was to embody William Sable while Naamah would embody Sarah, who was William's assistant at the time."

"So Sarah's one of us?" Ben asked.

William nodded. "She is."

"And Claire?" Bethany narrowed her eyes. When William remained silent, Bethany pointed her finger. "I knew it."

Ben stared at Zachary. He nodded, and Ben said, "That means there's—"

"Yes," Zachary said. "There's an angel constantly watching. That's how I knew."

Ben pointed at Zachary and yelled, "You knew we were in danger the whole time, and you never said anything?"

"We weren't in any danger," Zachary responded, holding his hand over the floor like he was trying to push the hostility down.

"You get to decide that?" Bethany asked. "What about us? I would've never agreed to come here if I'd known William was so careless."

William buried his face in his hands.

"Look," Zachary said, eyeing Ben. "How long were you here before I came?" Ben shrugged, and Zachary turned to

Bethany. “How long were you living with Claire before you brought me here?”

Bethany closed her mouth.

“Tell me one time”—he held a finger up—“you’ve been in danger because of her?” Zachary asked, as his eyes darted between the two of them. “That’s what I thought. Now, listen to what William has to say.”

They all looked at William who propped his chin on his thumbs.

“Well.” Bethany crossed her arms and sat back, her leg practically having a spasm. “This better be good.”

William drew a deep breath.



*37 Jockeying for Position*

WILLIAM LOOKED AT EACH OF THE MEMBERS OF HIS HOUSE. “The truth is, Zagan set us up to fail. I don’t blame him. I would’ve done the same thing, but I was too caught up in myself to see it.”

\* \* \*

“I have no desire to live amongst those feeble creatures,” Naamah said as she turned from Thamuz. A pair of female demons tended to her, one touching up a newly earned scar across her thigh, which protruded through a long slit in her elaborately adorned dress, the other braiding her long, white hair.

“It’s already in motion,” Thamuz stated as he studied the unusual braid. Not that the braid was out of the ordinary, but because most who have taken the frontline position of a Whisperer have opted for the removal of hair. It was a potential weakness during a confrontation with the enemy. It was also a trait of femininity in the human realm in which

they performed their tasks. Thamuz suspected Naamah kept hers as a sign of pride.

Naamah whipped her head and wheezed, "Take it back! You were foolish to believe I would consider such a preposterous proposal."

Thamuz sat on a stone throne in the corner of her chambers. "The two of us together is what swayed his decision. I could let Lucifer know you have changed your mind."

Naamah turned to her attendants. "Leave us."

The small one attending to her wounds lowered her head and vanished. The one braiding her hair protested, "My lord, I know how you detest an unfinished job. May I tie it off first?"

Thamuz narrowed his eyes. His attendants would never be so bold as to question his order.

Naamah raised her chin. "You may complete your task if it will create a more pleasurable outcome."

The attendant nodded and continued her process. Thamuz wondered why Naamah took such pride in an appearance she could never see.

Naamah looked through a hole roughly cut in the stone wall of her quarters and countered, "Perhaps, I should let Lucifer know of your deception."

Thamuz smiled. "You could. He does favor you. He may even believe what you say. Think before choosing your next course of action."

The attendant stepped away and admired her work. Naamah turned her head slightly and asked the attendant, "Am I beautiful?"

"More beautiful than Eve, my lord."

Naamah smiled. "Leave us, then." The attendant dissipated.

Thamuz sat up. "Zagan is next in line for the position."

Naamah flipped her hand. "Zagan is a fool."

“I don’t disagree, Naamah. But he will receive the reward, if allowed.”

Naamah laughed. “Zagan in the Solutos? He would never achieve it.”

“If he did, Naamah?”

“Ridiculous.” She swiped her hand.

“And yet?” Thamuz bowed his head.

Naamah faced him.

Thamuz sat back and touched his long fingers together. “I assume you have been on the wrong side of a disagreement with the great Zagan. Am I right?”

“We’ve had our... disagreements.” Naamah raised her chin.

“As a member of the Solutos, he would answer to no one, save the great Lucifer himself.” Thamuz stood and walked around Naamah. “Completely unbound and fully protected.” He circled her while she considered. “Any with the slightest unfavorable perception would be at his mercy.” He leaned in and whispered, “Unless we get there first.” He turned, took two steps, and spun. “Think of it. The name of Naamah added to those in the Solutos.”

Naamah smiled. “And if I help... Thamuz would also be unbound?”

“True.” Thamuz pursed his lips and nodded. “We would rule the new heaven Lord Lucifer has promised. Zagan would no longer be a threat.”

Naamah smiled. She straightened and closed her eyes. “He’s summoning.”

Thamuz stopped. “I feel it. Are we in agreement?”

Naamah opened her eyes. She looked over the vast view of fire and ash. “A short human life shouldn’t be too difficult considering the prize.”

The power of the leader’s thoughts transported them in front of the council of Solutos. They were placed in their thrones of leadership, along with a hundred other legion

commanders. Seated directly in the center was the high chief Zagan, commander of the Whisperers.

The eldest member of the Solutos spoke in a wearied tone, as if this duty was completely unimportant. "It is hereby the order of Lucifer himself, a new house of Talkers is to be established." Zagan sat tall in his throne. The elder continued, "They shall be birthed into the house of Rahab, known as Goddard Gainsboro during his current commission..."

A quiet murmur spread throughout the assembly hall. The use of the word "they" had never been used in this ceremony. Zagan looked to the thrones surrounding him.

The Elder went on. "They will enter training immediately following this ceremony. During the normal course of preparation, Legion Commander Zagan will perform the selection—"

Zagan stood. "I demand to know the meaning of this!"

One of the Solutos looked at Zagan with sleepy eyes and said, "You will follow Lord Lucifer's request, Zagan. You know the punishment for noncompliance?"

Zagan blanched and sat.

"As I was saying," the Solutos continued. "Zagan will perform the selection and complete the proper placement of the subjects." The Solutos council stood, followed by the entire assembly. "The commission of house leaders is bestowed upon joint sovereigns, Thamuz and Naamah." The leader reached his hand out. "Please join us for the conferment." He turned toward Zagan. "Help us welcome your new subjects."

Zagan nodded and walked forward. He glanced at Thamuz and Naamah then faced the assembly.

The entire assembly together said, "May the will of the great Lord Lucifer be upon you."

"Now, back to your business," the Solutos commanded. The hall was emptied, leaving Zagan, his attendant, Naamah, and Thamuz alone.

Zagan looked between the two of them. “I don’t know how you accomplished this, but I will find suitable candidates for your placement.” Zagan turned from them and walked away with his assistant. “Rest assured, the two of them will not succeed in this task. I *will* receive what I deserve.”

“Yes, Lord Zagan. I have something in mind,” the assistant quietly said.

“Good. Good. I wish to witness their screams,” Zagan said with a laugh.

Thamuz turned to Naamah. “Are you prepared for this?”

“How hard could it be?” Naamah replied. “What’s a human life? Fifty? A hundred years?”

“Don’t take this lightly, Naamah,” Thamuz said, narrowing his eyes. “How many house leaders have there been?” She shook her head, and he continued, “There are only ten Solutos.”

They both tilted their heads back and closed their eyes, sensing the thoughts summoning them to training. They disappeared, and the assembly hall was empty.

\* \* \*

“You said you were setup to fail,” Bethany said. “It sounds like you got the better of him.”

“It was Claire,” Sarah said as she reached the bottom of the stairs.

“Is she okay?” William asked.

Sarah smiled. “Sleeping. She’s had a difficult day.” She walked to the loveseat and sat next to William. “Zagan pitted several things against us in our placement.” She looked at William. “Had we been more cautious, we would have seen them.”

William explained. “Zagan has commanded the legions of Whisperers for two hundred fifty years. In that time, he’s witnessed many failures. He’s studied the weaknesses of those in his charge.” He turned to Zachary. “Remember I told you that boy, the one who’s body you’ve taken, is still in there?”

Bethany and Ben looked at Zachary. He shrugged.

Sarah continued, "Things from the body's past remain with you throughout your embodiment."

"That's why I tell you to get rid of everything from the past," William explained. "Holding onto things can arouse the feelings that remain within you. If a possession reminds someone of something good, it brings good feelings. If it carries bad memories, it can bring bad traits."

Bethany tilted her head. "Is that why I had to leave everything behind when we came here?"

"Exactly," William answered. "If something from the past is attached to any kind of feelings or emotions, that object can bring about the same kind of response."

Zachary realized he was tracing the circle in his pocket. He repositioned and held his hands in his lap.

"So Claire was something from Sarah's past," Ben said. He lowered his head. "But how do you get rid of a child?"

"Wait," Bethany interjected. "It's more than that." She raised her hand and pointed her finger between William and Sarah. "You two—I mean, Sarah and William—had a history, didn't you?" William leaned his forehead into his hands, and Bethany continued, "Absolutely brilliant." She leaned back with a smile on her face.

"I don't get it," Ben said.

"Even if they got rid of the child," Bethany said, "they were a package deal. The whole reason Lucifer agreed to let them step in front of Zagan was because they were doing it together." Bethany lifted her chin. "So how long had William and Sarah been doing it?"

Ben's mouth fell open.

"We didn't bother with the history when we joined Goddard's house," William said. "When he found out about Claire, he was furious. Goddard knew Zagan had sabotaged the entire house. He began questioning acquaintances of the possessed."

“As it turned out,” Sarah said. “My body was recently divorced. Her ex-husband was abusive and controlling. He’d found out about the affair and was attempting to take custody of Claire.”

“But he couldn’t afford to go against the Sable lawyers on a professor’s salary,” William said. “So he started taking matters into his own hands.”

“I don’t get it,” Ben said. “Why didn’t you just let him have her? Wouldn’t that solve one of the problems?”

“That’s what Goddard told us to do,” William admitted. “But things got a little more complicated.”

A light knock on the front door caused them to stop talking.

Zachary jumped up and saw Emma through the glass. “It’s Emma.”

“Speaking of complicated,” Bethany mumbled.

Zachary held his finger up. “Give me a minute.” Bethany rolled her eyes while Zachary slipped out.



38 *I Can Fix It*

“HEY, EMMA. WHAT’S UP?” ZACHARY ASKED.

Emma gave a weak smile and wrapped her arms around him. “I just wanted to see you. Is that okay?” She looked past him and saw people through the etched glass. She pulled away. “You have company. I shouldn’t have come so late.”

“No. Em. It’s okay.” He held her shoulders, bent down, and looked in her eyes. “Are you alright?”

She laid her head on his chest and listened to his heartbeat. “I just needed to be with someone I can trust.” She closed her eyes. “Can you hold me for a while?”

“Sure,” Zachary said as he wrapped his arms around her and rested his chin on the top of her head. Something about her seemed different. She let out a small moan, and he kissed the top of her head then drew a long breath, marveling at the warmth and scent of Emma.

She moved her head against his firm chest and whispered, “I love it when you do that.”

Zachary smiled. “When I do what?”

She tightened her arms. "When you smell me."

"You know I do that?"

"Uh-huh."

"You don't think it's weird?"

"Uh-uh." She looked up at him. "When you do it, your heart speeds up a little, and you hold me the tiniest bit tighter. I don't think you know you're doing it."

"And you like that?"

She nestled her head into his chest. "It makes me feel like you actually want me with you."

"Well, you're right. I always do."

Emma's face grew serious as she kept it buried firmly in his chest. "No matter what? Even if I do something terrible?"

"Of course, Ems," Zachary whispered. "You could never do anything that would make me not want you."

Emma's lip trembled. "Do you promise?"

Zachary moved his hands to her shoulders, gently nudged her, and looked in her eyes. "I promise you, Emma Louise Green. No matter what happens, I'll always be there for you. There's nothing you can do to change that."

She wrapped him in her arms and leaned her forehead on his chest. "I know what I have to do, Zack. I can fix everything."

"You don't have to fix anything, Emma."

"I should've known all along," she said with a slight laugh before pulling away. "It was staring me right in the face the whole time." Her eyes welled up. "Daddy can go back to work, and the town can be normal again." She smiled as a tear ran down her face. "I can fix it."

She pulled him in and kissed him deeply then pushed away. She ran down the walkway and climbed into her dad's truck. She didn't look back as she drove away.

The door behind him opened. Bethany stepped out and closed it. Zachary didn't turn, so she stood beside him and said, "You must be a terrible kisser. Not that I'm surprised."

Zachary looked at her as she stared into the night.

“But to make a girl run away like that?” Bethany shook her head. She grinned and faced him. Her face straightened, and she turned to the street again. “I don’t hate her, Zack.”

“What?”

“Emma. I don’t hate her. Trust me... I’ve tried. With her perfect hair and stupidly gorgeous eyes.... I want to hate her, but then she talks or looks at me or most everything she does, and I can’t.” She looked at him with a cold, dead stare. “If you tell anyone, I’ll deny it, but just between us”—she motioned her finger between the two of them—“I really like her, Zack. I think I’ll actually feel bad when she falls.”

Zachary looked at her. “What makes you think she will?”

“You know something? My legions have tried everything with her, but you know what really worked?”

Zachary tilted his head.

Bethany put her hand on his back. “In her most private moments, when the angels turn, she whispers your name.” She turned toward him. “I underestimated you, Zack. I was taking the credit, but it was all you. You’ve really made it easy for whoever is working with her now.”

“What do you mean ‘easy?’”

“Nothing really. She’s just open to ‘inspirations’ right now. Who knows what they’ll lead her to do?”

Zachary grabbed Bethany’s shoulders. “Who’s working on her now?”

Bethany blanched. “I told you. I don’t know.”

“Can you find out?”

Bethany shook her head. “I was specifically told to stay away.”

Zachary flew through the door and stopped in front of William and Sarah. “I need to know who Zagan assigned to Emma.”

William shook his head. "We can't worry about her right now, Zack. I promise, once we finish with Zagan, it may not matter."

Zachary turned to Ben. "Can you find out? You said you've met with him."

William stood and looked at Ben. "You have a commission?"

Ben's eyes grew narrow, and his jaw set. "I told you not to tell anyone, Zack." He crossed his arms. "I agree with William. We need to deal with Zagan first."

Zachary took two steps toward Ben. "What if it was Anne?" Ben's jaw flexed. "I know you care about her. You would do anything to protect her."

Ben spat, "That's totally different!"

"Why?" Zachary clenched his fists. "It's exactly the same thing."

"Because she's not my commission, Zack," Ben said through clenched teeth. "What I do with Anne has nothing to do with my commission."

Zachary turned and walked toward the door. William asked, "Zack? Where are you going? We need you here right now."

Without turning, he reached for the door handle and said, "She said she knows how to fix things. I need to know what that means."

William shouted, "Zack! Now's not the time! Do not leave."

The door slammed, and Zachary was gone.



39 *The List*

BETHANY STOOD IN THE FOYER, HER EYES DARTING BETWEEN William and this new woman Sarah. There was so much to process. William and Sarah were total failures; yet somehow, they're still here. Claire was human with an actual angel who was watching over a house of demons. Zagan had planned this whole messed up situation. And she had no idea what's going on with Ben.

Instinctively, she glanced at the front door, but William said, "Don't."

She looked back at him and narrowed her eyes. Who the hell was he to tell her what she could and couldn't do. Especially when he didn't follow his own rules. The most confusing thing was she actually cared about someone other than herself. The look of desperation in Zachary's eyes pulled at her. He cared about Emma, and for some strange reason, she cared about that stupid girl, too.

She spun and whipped the door open despite William's shouts. She sprinted to the sidewalk then spun around.

Where was Zachary heading? Down the street, she caught sight of movement.

She took off. “Zack!” He was already two blocks ahead of her. How was he so fast? “Zack! Wait!” she yelled, trying to catch her breath.

He slowed and looked back at her. “I have to find her! I don’t care what William says! Don’t try to stop me.”

“I’m... not,” she said through heaving breaths. “I want...” she huffed, “to help.”

Zachary stopped and turned.

When she caught up with him, she collapsed in his arms. “I want to help, Zack.”

He lifted her. “Why, Beth?”

“Because I care about you.” She looked in his eyes. “And I have no idea why, but I care about Emma.” She rested her hands on her knees and asked, “So, where are we going?”

“I don’t know. I was gonna try her house first.”

Emma stood up. “Let’s go, then. How far?”

“Maybe a couple miles.”

“Maybe? What if she’s not there?”

Zachary paced and rubbed his jaw. “Maybe the church, the paper. I don’t know. I have to find her.”

Bethany lifted her head and held up her finger. “I have an idea. Come back and wait at the end of the block.”

“What’re you gonna do?”

She sucked in a breath. “I’m gonna get us a ride.”

Zachary watched Bethany run to the side of the house and disappear. He paced impatiently. Several minutes went by, and he cursed himself for stopping in the first place. He turned, and before he could take one step, he heard a faint rumble. A sliver of light appeared from William’s garage, and the black Mercedes came screeching onto the street. The front door flew open, and William chased the car, screaming, “Bethany! No! Stop right now!”

The car veered toward Zachary and stopped right beside him. He looked back at William running toward him and hesitated.

“Get in, idiot,” Bethany said. She reached across the car and pushed the door open.

As William closed the gap, Zachary jumped in the car. William pounded his hands on the trunk, and Bethany shoved her foot on the gas, slamming the passenger door shut and leaving William fuming in the street.

Bethany whooped and laughed. “That was awesome.” She nervously gripped the wheel and asked. “So, where are we going?”

“Left here,” Zachary said, pointing at the street as they passed it.

Bethany jammed her foot on the brake, causing Zachary to brace himself against the dashboard. She put the car in reverse, angled it to make the corner, and took off. “Now where?”

“See that stop sign up there?”

“Yeah.”

“Take a right; then, we go toward the town center.”

“Got it,” Bethany said with a smirk on her face.

Zachary smiled. “You didn’t tell me you could drive.”

“I’ve been here a lot longer than you.”

“Why didn’t William take me to get a license?”

“He didn’t take me either. He said I wasn’t responsible enough.”

Zachary watched a stop sign fly by. “Maybe he was right.”

“Brad taught me. His parents have this huge farm.” She shrugged. “His uncle works at the DMV. William always made it sound like such a huge deal. It’s not.”

“Wait,” Zachary said. “If he didn’t know... didn’t you drive me that first night?”

“Yeah. That was quite a night. First, you were coming, and trust me, a birth isn’t something you can just reschedule, then Claire was having a meltdown over William forgetting about parent night.” Bethany reached into her bag and pulled out a card. “That’s when I whipped out the provisional. He was both relieved and about to blow a gasket.” She put the card away. “Anyway, he did the Claire thing and I birthed you. Everything worked out.” She rolled her eyes. “He still won’t let me drive.”

Zachary pointed forward. “Take a right at that light then the first left. It’s a quiet street so we have to go slow.”

Bethany nodded and followed Zachary’s directions. She pulled the car in front of Emma’s house. “Looks different from this side.”

Zachary turned toward her. “Her dad’s not the friendliest, so...”

Bethany shut the car off and pulled the keys out before opening her door and standing up.

Zachary jumped out. “It’s probably better if I...”

Ignoring him completely, Bethany closed her door and started walking up the path. “Uh-uh, Zack. She’s my friend, too.”

Zachary ran in front of her and knocked on the screen door. A few seconds went by; then, Bethany pulled the screen open and knocked.

“I’m coming; I’m coming.” They could hear Mr. Green’s muffled voice. The door opened, and a line formed on Mr. Green’s forehead. “Zack? And, um...”

Bethany reached her hand out. “I’m Beth.”

Mr. Green stared for a second before looking up.

“Beth’s my cousin, Norman,” Zachary said. “Look, we were worried about Emma.” He tried to look past Mr. Green. “Is she here?”

Mr. Green drew a long breath. “No, she left a while back.”

“Do you know where she went, Norman?” Bethany asked.

Mr. Green raised an eyebrow and looked back at Zachary. “Can’t say as I do. She seemed to be in a hurry, though. She said she had to get some things... for a project of some sort.”

“Any idea where she would’ve went?” Bethany asked.

Mr. Green raised his eyebrows and pursed his lips. “She hasn’t had many friends around...” He motioned toward Zachary. “Aside from you.”

“Mind if we look in her room?” Zachary asked.

Mr. Green took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. He stood back and pulled the door open. The two thanked him, and Zachary led Bethany up the stairs. She stopped at the door and looked around the room. Zachary went inside and started rummaging through the papers on her desk.

Bethany bit her lip. “This is where she lives?” She walked in, touching her finger on a dresser, the nightstand, and a small alarm clock. “It’s so small. I didn’t realize. Everything looks so different when you really see it.”

Zachary grabbed her shoulders. “We’re trying to figure out what she’s planning. See if you can find something that helps.”

Bethany nodded. “Sorry.” When Zachary turned around to look at her computer, Bethany sat on Emma’s bed. She couldn’t help but notice how small and hard it was. She tried to imagine living in the small room. Everything looked so old, like it had already worn out its usefulness, and was now just waiting to be thrown out.

“Damn it,” Zachary said, throwing some papers on the desk. He whispered to himself, “What are you doing, Emma?”

Bethany swung her feet around and stretched her arms. Zachary spun and asked, “What are you doing? Get up. We have to find something.”

She rolled over and curled into a fetal position facing the single small window. As she slid her hand under the pillow, she paused. There was something there. She pulled it out. "What's this?"

"What?"

Bethany ran her fingers over the notepad she was holding. "It looks like a list."

Zachary sat. "Let me see that." He looked it over.

Dress

Shoes

Mike

Picture

Pete

"Dress and shoes are crossed out, but who's Mike and Pete?" Bethany asked.

Zachary shook his head. "I don't remember anyone with those names." He dropped the notepad to his lap. "Maybe this is nothing." He tossed it on the nightstand and rested his head in his hands, massaging his temples. "God, I don't even know where to look next. There's so much I never bothered to learn. I don't even know any of her friends. How could I be so stupid?"

Bethany rubbed his back. "It's not your fault."

"Oh, yeah? Well whose is it?" He faced her. "You said it was all because of me." He stood and put his hand out. She grabbed it, and he pulled her up before snatching the notepad and staring at it.

On their way out, they walked by her small bathroom and down the stairs. Mr. Green was sitting in his chair. As he got up, he asked, "Did you find anything?"

"I don't think so," Zachary said. He glanced at the notepad. "Do you know a Mike or a Pete?"

"There's a Mike in the church. He's an older deacon. I don't know of a Pete," Mr. Green replied. "Why?"

Zachary lowered his head. "It's probably nothing." He looked back at Mr. Green without raising his head. "Would you mind if I hung out here? Just until she gets back. I'm really worried about her."

"You do seem concerned. I suppose you could take the sofa. Least until she comes home."

"I'll stay with you," Bethany said.

"You have to go home. William and Sarah will need you," Zachary responded. "I'll call you if anything comes up."

Bethany wrinkled her forehead. "You sure? I'd rather stay."

"Trust me. They need you more than I do right now. There's a lot to prepare for tonight," Zachary told Bethany.

Mr. Green looked with raised eyebrows. "You goin' to the site tomorrow?"

"The site?" Zachary asked.

"The building dedication."

"Oh, no. We have an old friend coming to town. We have a lot to get ready."

Zachary walked Bethany to the door. "I guess William's going to be pretty mad when you get home."

"Don't worry about me, Zack," She put her hand on his shoulder. "Let me know as soon as you know something about Emma."

Zachary nodded, and Bethany hopped in the car and drove away.

"It ain't very comfortable, but there's a small blanket hangin' over the arm if you get cold." He walked toward a door. "I'm gonna leave this open so I can hear when she comes in." He walked through the door and half-closed it. He stood for a few seconds, staring at Zachary before giving him a small wave and disappearing.

Zachary wiggled and squirmed on the old loveseat, trying to get comfortable. He couldn't figure out how to sit comfortably on it, but it was too small to lay on without

his feet sticking over the arm. He struggled with the small blanket and tried to lay on his side.

He felt a gentle nudge, and his eyes flew open. He nearly jumped out of the loveseat.

“What are you doing here?” Emma asked.

The moonlight created a perfect halo around her. Zachary relaxed and put his head back down. A smile crept over his face. “You’re okay. I was so worried.”



40 *A Couple of Things*

EMMA PLANTED THE SOFTEST KISS ON HIS LIPS BEFORE pulling away and looking into his eyes. She wrapped her hand around his arm, gently pulled, and whispered, “Come on. Let’s get you home.”

Zachary sat up and stretched his aching muscles. The notepad dropped to the floor as he rolled his neck. Emma sucked in a breath and looked to see if he’d noticed. She reached for it and tucked it in a side pocket of her bag. Zachary let out a quiet grunt as he stood, but Emma quickly silenced him with a finger to her lips. He silently stood and stretched, looking around thinking he’d forgotten something.

“Missing something?” Emma asked.

Zachary blinked his eyes. He couldn’t remember bringing anything. He was just relieved Emma was back. “I guess not. I left in a hurry. I don’t remember bringing anything.”

“Hang on,” Emma whispered as she walked to the kitchen counter. She scratched a note and folded it. On her

way back, she dropped the paper on her dad's recliner. "I don't want him to worry."

Zachary nodded. He was glad she'd thought of it. When Norman Green woke and both Emma and Zachary weren't there, he might've been concerned. It was a good idea to let him know she's okay.

Emma led him out to the pickup, and they got in, closing the doors as quietly as possible on an almost-old-enough-to-be-classic truck. Every sound they made on the darkened street sounded loud enough to wake the dead. Maybe it was.

Emma cringed as she cranked the ignition. The engine fired up, and she slowly backed out of the driveway and headed toward William's house. After a few minutes, she turned to him. "Did you walk all the way here?"

"I was running, and—"

"That's like two and a half miles," Emma said.

"I started running, but Beth drove me the rest of the way."

"So Beth drives, but you don't. Isn't she the same age?" She pursed her lips. "I'm kind of surprised William trusted her that much."

"He didn't. I guess her boyfriend taught her." Zachary raised an eyebrow. "Why wouldn't William trust her?"

"You know. I mean... I think the way she's overcome so much is amazing, considering..."

"Considering?"

Emma shook her head quickly. "Please don't hate me. I didn't even pay attention at first. I figured they were just rumors, but when you showed up..."

Zachary narrowed his eyes. "When I showed up?"

Emma pulled the truck over in the Walmart parking lot and shut the engine off. She turned toward him and closed her eyes. When she reopened them, she said, "Look, it's a pretty big deal when someone as important as William Sable moves to a town like ours."

Zachary nodded. "Makes sense."

"Then he adopts a girl like Beth?"

Zachary's mouth opened, but he didn't exactly know the question to ask.

"That's why I like her so much. I mean, she's kind of rude and super sarcastic, but I seriously would've never known. By the time she started school here, she was a completely different person. If I didn't see the picture, I wouldn't even believe she went through all that. I think she's the most amazing person I know."

Zachary turned his head and focused on one of the streetlights illuminating the lot. "You know about her?"

"I do." Emma shook her head briskly. "Don't tell her I know if it'll make her hate me." She reached for his hand. "But when you said you were from Arizona, it all kind of made sense." Zachary looked at her, and she lowered her head. "Don't worry. There's nothing online about you, but the picture of Mr. Sable holding her was amazing. Some gossip magazine ran the article. I looked again the other day, but the story was taken down. I guess it's a privacy thing, but I think saving girls from that kind of life is commendable." She shook her head. "Human trafficking? I can't even imagine."

She bit her lip. "I've been wanting to tell William what a great thing he's doing, giving such a huge donation to the Streetlight program, but I think he would hate me if he found out I researched him." She looked up. "Are you mad?"

What kind of life was Bethany living? He didn't know her before she pulled him from the water.

Zachary straightened. "You looked me up? When?"

Emma nodded. "To be fair, you *were* stalking me that first week, right?"

Zachary couldn't deny it. "Maybe."

"And a girl has the right to know if the new kid in town is some sort of serial killer?"

Zachary smiled. "I suppose."

“You’re not mad?” Emma bowed her head.

“Of course not,” Zachary responded.

Emma bent over, kissed him, and sat up. “Good. There are a couple of things I want to try tonight.”

“It’s kind of late. Don’t you have to get home?”

Emma pinched her lips. “I may not get another chance. And this is the perfect time.” She turned her head.

“Okay, then,” Zachary said. “Tonight it is.”

Emma smiled, opened her door, and hopped out. She looked back in and said, “Trade places.”

“What?”

She ran around to his side and pulled his door open. “You heard me. Trade places.” She grabbed his arm and drug him out before jumping in the passenger seat and looking at him. “Go on.” She pointed. “Get in.”

“But...” He slowly walked around to the other side and stood.

“I know,” she said. “You don’t know how to drive.” She patted the seat. “Tonight, we fix that.”

Zachary shrugged and hesitantly climbed in. He closed the door then held both hands awkwardly in the air. “Now what?”

Emma pointed to the floor. “Push the left pedal to the floor with your left foot, and turn the key.”

Zachary pushed the pedal in, and with a quick glance and a reassuring nod, he turned the key. The engine turned over and promptly stalled.

Emma pinched her lips to one side. “I forgot to tell you about the gas pedal. Push the clutch, turn the key, and give it some gas with your right foot when you do.”

“Okay,” Zachary said. He followed her instructions and hit the gas. The engine roared a long growl.

She yelled at him, “Stop! Take your foot off the gas! Sorry, my bad. I’ve never taught anyone before.”

For the next thirty minutes, Zachary stalled the engine fourteen times, nearly hit three of the light posts, and ran over the parking blocks twice. A nice bruise had formed on his right shoulder from Emma hitting him each time he nearly damaged her dad's truck. Zachary had never laughed so much.

Finally, he pulled into a lined space perfectly. He adored the smile and the warm pink glow in Emma's cheeks as she sat in the passenger seat, still laughing at his terrible driving skills.

Then, she leaned in and kissed him. He put his hand on the back of her neck and massaged her head. She pulled away and whispered, "Thank you, Zack. Let's get you home." He reached for the door handle, but she said, "No. You drive."

"You sure?"

She smiled. "Just once, I want you to drive me."

Zachary took a deep breath, put the truck in reverse, and backed up. He looked at Emma for reassurance. She gave a single nod, and he put the truck into first gear, promptly stalling the engine.

"Sorry. You sure you want me to do this?"

Emma scooted next to him and laid her head on his shoulder. "Absolutely."

He followed the start up procedure then put the truck in gear. With a surge, he angled it toward the street. He pulled out perfectly and headed toward William's house. Emma held on to him and only chuckled a couple of times when he stalled the engine at two stop signs and a red light.

The truck bounced off the curb in front of William's house, and Zachary cringed. "Sorry."

Emma sat up. "Don't worry. It'll survive."

"Thank you for tonight. I had the best time."

Emma pulled him into a kiss and said, "Me too. So far." She swung her door open and stood on the curb.

Zachary got out then walked over to her. He took both of her hands. “Emma Louise Green, I can’t tell you how much you’ve changed my life. When I’m with you, I can’t even remember who I was before.” Zachary cringed. “That didn’t sound so corny in my he—”

Emma’s lips met his, and she pulled herself into him. He moaned as her tongue tickled his upper lip, which as if on queue, opened his mouth. She buried one hand in his thick hair while the other caressed his lower back.

Emma pulled her hand out of his hair and ran it down his neck, his shoulder, his arm until she gripped his hand. She smiled and turned, pulling him down the walk toward his house.

“What’re you doing?” Zachary asked with a smile on his face.

She started skipping, and he trotted along behind her. “I’m gonna tuck you in.” She turned her head as she reached the door. “Make sure you get a good night’s sleep.” She quietly opened the door. “What’s left of it anyway.”

“We shouldn’t...”

She silenced him with a finger to her lips for the second time that night. He couldn’t help but smile watching Emma Louise Green hunched over like she’s trying to sneak past a security guard at the library. They quietly climbed the stairs then tiptoed past each door and into Zachary’s room. She pushed him in and closed the door as quietly as she could.

“Okay,” Zachary said. “I’m safe at home now. You happy?”

She bit her index finger and looked at him. “I said I’d tuck you in.”

She walked slowly to him and cupped his cheeks while gently kissing him once; then, she pulled away. “Let’s get you ready.”

Zachary’s breath’s grew quick as she drew her hands down his sides. Her fingers made contact with his skin,

making his pulse quicken. Slowly, she slid his shirt off. He closed his eyes and tilted his head as she planted several kisses on his chest.

Zachary's head raced. Images of Bethany, Sarah, William, and Claire flashed in his mind. With each kiss, a new image of Emma replaced his housemates. Emma worked her way up his neck and pulled his head down.

As her warm tongue played with his, he knew he belonged to her. She whispered, "I want to give you something before it's too late." Gently, she nibbled his ear lobe.

His body quivered. He felt her hands and body pull away. Cold and lost without her touch, he slowly opened his eyes and watched her dress fall to the floor.

The moonlight streaming through the window highlighted her white lace bra, panties, and smooth skin. His eyes traced every perfect line as she stepped toward him. The lace played with his chest as his hands ran the length of her back. With a gentle nudge, she pushed him on the bed and slowly crawled on top of him.

For the first time, he felt the length of her body pressing into him. His mind flashed with the face of William. He forced it out and kissed her. Zagan's face assaulted him, and he flinched. He pushed it away and breathed in long and slow. His room swarmed with the scent of Emma. A memory of a formless Screamer filled his mind, and he sat up.

"Are you okay?" Emma asked as she pulled him down.

He laid down and kissed her again, but an image of a Whisperer prodding Emma on filled his mind. He spun his head and looked around the room.

Nothing there. No demons. They were alone.

Emma narrowed her eyes. "Is something wrong?"

Zachary sat on the edge of the bed and rested his chin on his thumbs. "I'm sorry, Emma." He looked at her. "We can't do this. Not now."

"What?" She sat up. "You don't want me?"

Zachary turned to her. "Trust me, Ems. I do, but..."

Emma's shoulders caved in, and she held an arm over her lace-covered breasts. "That's okay. I understand." She reached for her dress.

Zachary stood and walked over to her. "You don't understand."

Emma bunched her dress in her hands and snatched her shoes. "I think I do, Zack." She opened the door and ran down the hallway.

As Zachary chased her towards the front door, she dropped one of the shoes and scrambled for it. When she stood, he held her by the waist. "Emma." She wouldn't look at him. "It's not you."

Emma stared. "It's not me? Is that what you're trying to say?"

Zachary blanched.

"This isn't some cheesy movie, Zack. You don't just get to say 'It's not you; it's me' and make it all better. This is my life." Her eyes welled up. "I just wanted to give you something, something that means a lot to me before it's too late." She shook her head. "And you don't even want it."

She turned toward the door and reached for the handle. Zachary pulled her back and spun her around. "Emma, you don't understand. You've given me everything. There's nothing else. You gave me life. You gave me purpose. You taught me I can love. Emma, I love you."

Emma stopped fighting and stared at him. Her eyes searched his. He released her, and she backed against the door, awkwardly hugging her dress and shoes tight. A moment later, she began pacing. Zachary stepped toward her, but she put her hand up.

"Don't."

He stopped.

"Give me a minute."

As she paced, Zachary looked around to see if any of the family had come out to witness the argument. He wasn't sure how he'd explain the beautiful girl pacing in front of him in her underwear. Clearly, she wasn't concerned as she mumbled to herself.

Suddenly, she stopped and turned to him. "I'm sorry, Zack." Her head bowed like she was reconsidering; then, she looked up. "I can't right now." She turned and put her hand on the door handle. "I just don't love you." She swung it open and ran out.

The door closed, leaving Zachary staring after Emma's distorted figure running into the darkness. She didn't love him. After centuries, a few short months of a human life had changed his entire being. He loved someone. He was willing to suffer for all eternity for her, yet she didn't love him. "It's better this way. It's not like we had a future," he told himself. But he still loved her, and he would protect her, even if it meant he'd lose everything.



4I *Mutatio in Locis*

“OOOH, THAT’S ROUGH.”

Zachary raised his head and saw Bethany leaning on the upstairs railing. He dropped his head against the door with a thud and stared at the ceiling.

He’d never noticed the crystals hanging in the foyer. It seemed as if there were a hundred of them suspended by thin wires, forming three spheres and a swirl of crystal weaving around them as it descended. Everything was illuminated with a series of lights directly above, casting colored beams in all directions.

There was so much about this house—and this world—he’d never taken the time to notice, yet Emma seemed to see everything in ways he could never understand. She saw things. Real things. All he’d ever seen was what he wanted, never what he really needed. Until now. When it’s too late.

He let out a long breath. “How much did you see?”

Bethany walked down the stairs. “Enough.”

She stood in front of him. His head remained planted on the door as his eyes half-opened, revealing her face. "I'm such an idiot."

She smirked. "What else is new?"

He let out a slight chuckle; then, every muscle in his face contracted, and his lip started trembling. He lost control and buried his face in his knees, sobbing for the first time in his existence.

Bethany kneeled, wrapped her arms around him, and pulled his head to her shoulder. She held him, trying to think of what to do as his body spasmed. She could deal with boys when they were jerks or just plain imbeciles, but this was new. She'd brought men to tears before, but it was always from her realm and always out of shame.

Zachary's tears were different. It wasn't shame. It was loss. When he told Emma he loved her, he really did. She wasn't sure how it was possible for someone like them, but Emma Louise Green had somehow changed him. And watching the two of them had stirred something in her she thought had died thousands of years ago. She cared.

"I can't say it's gonna be okay, Zack," she said as she pulled away and looked in his eyes. "But you were right. It is better this way."

Zachary straightened and slid both hands down his face. He sniffed. "I know." He looked up with his head down. "Can this stay between us?"

Bethany crisscrossed her finger over her chest. "It's our secret." She patted the marble floor next to her. "Come here."

He scooted close to her and wrapped his arm around her. As she leaned on his chest, he said, "Thank you, Bethany."

She traced a heart on Zachary's stomach and thought about what he'd told Emma. Her mind wandered to Sarah and William. She pictured them sitting close on the loveseat. Maybe she was imagining things, but she forced her memory to focus on the way they held each other. She remembered

they were holding hands, but it wasn't just that. As they talked, each of their thumbs gently caressed each other's as if they weren't aware of the action. It was like they had a need to soothe one another.

"Zachary?" Bethany asked quietly. "Do you think you really love Emma?"

Zachary thoughtlessly played with Bethany's hair and said, "I think so. I mean... it's been so long, but it's overwhelming. I'd give up everything, even eternity for her. Why?"

Bethany sat up and faced him. "I don't know. I was so mad at William earlier I think I missed something."

"I'm sorry about that. I wanted to tell you a long time ago."

"No. It's not that." She straightened and pointed at him. "I mean... I am mad you didn't tell me, but it's something else. This may sound crazy, but I think they love each other." A line formed in her forehead. "Do you think it's possible?"

"I know it is. Why do you think they're planning to take on Zagan? It's not revenge. They want to stay together. That's what this whole plan is about."

"They didn't tell us there's a plan," Bethany said.

Zachary opened his mouth wide then closed it. "That's right," he said. "Emma interrupted that part. They'll probably tell you in the morning."

Bethany narrowed her eyes. "If there's a plan, you're gonna tell me right now."

Zachary sighed. "Okay, but let's go someplace so we don't wake anyone."

Bethany stood and reached her hand out. "Okay, let's go to my room."

Zachary looked at her sideways and eyed her silky nightgown.

She rolled her eyes. "Fine. I promise I won't try anything... this time."

Zachary took her hand, and the two of them went to her bedroom and closed the door. Bethany went to her bed, grabbed a pillow, and sat with it on her lap as she leaned against the headboard. She pointed to the other side of the bed and said, "That side's yours. I promise I won't invade."

Zachary walked around and sat, mimicking her position with a pillow on his lap. He looked around. "Why is everything in your room so much nicer than mine?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe it's because I'm a girl." She grinned and raised her eyebrows. "Maybe it's because William just likes me better."

Zachary thought, *Maybe it's because of where you came from before your body was taken by a demon.* He wasn't sure what Emma meant earlier, but it sounded like the girl Bethany was before had a terrible life. He decided to drop the subject. "I guess being a girl has its perks."

"Can I tell you something?" Bethany asked. "I mean... since it's confession time."

"Sure," Zachary shrugged.

"I love being a girl. Is that weird?" She waited for him to respond. He just tilted his head as if to prod her on. "I love the colors, the soaps, the perfumes..." She rubbed her silk pillowcase. "Have you ever felt anything so smooth?" She flipped her hair. "I love the feel of hair on my shoulders and back and the way it tickles my chest before I get dressed." She ran her hands down her nightgown. "And the clothes. I love how my skin feels in expensive materials. Oh, and I *love* underwear."

Zachary narrowed his eyes. He liked how she was opening up, but this may be going a little far.

"I know. It sounds weird. Some of them are more like torture devices, but the silk and lace, how they pull and creep and tug make me feel beautiful."

"You don't need underwear to be beautiful, Beth."

Bethany raised one eyebrow.

Zachary shook his head. "That didn't come out right. What I meant was, you're already beautiful, and not just on the outside."

Bethany rolled on her side, propped her head on her hand, and hugged the pillow. "Keep talking like that, and I may rescind my pledge of non-invasion." Zachary glared at her, and she flicked her hand. "Relax. I'm kidding."

She pulled one of her other pillows and tucked it under her head. "You know what I've always wanted, Zack?"

He smiled. "Sex?"

Bethany threw her pillow at him. "No." He caught it, and she snatched it back then stuffed it under her head. "Okay." She smiled. "Yes. I mean, you have no idea. I'm like obsessed. Like a total freak show." She rolled her head toward him. "Seriously, you have no idea what it's like wanting it all the time and not being able to do anything about it."

Zachary's face grew serious.

"Oh, God. I'm sorry. Sometimes, I have this problem where I only think about myself." She rolled onto her side. "What I was going to say was, I've always wanted someone to look at me the way you look at Emma." She touched his arm. "And I want to see someone the way she sees you."

Zachary relaxed and slid to lay down facing Bethany. "How do you think she sees me?"

"She loves you, Zack."

"Then why did she leave?"

"I think you terrify her."

"That doesn't make sense."

"You know how you said it feels overwhelming?"

He nodded.

"And how you're willing to give up everything for her?"

"Yes."

"And you don't see how that can be scary?"

Zachary turned onto his back and laced his fingers behind his head. "You think she's afraid to love me?"

Bethany rolled onto her back again and hugged her pillow. "I don't know. You're really asking the wrong person. I'm a demon, remember? What do I know about love?"

They both stared at the ceiling and sighed.

Bethany asked, "What about that plan of William's?"

Zachary turned on his side and propped his head up. "You remember Goddard Gainsboro?"

She faced him. "Sure. That's Rahab, the house leader for William and Sarah when they first came."

"He's still here."

"What? Where is he?"

"Prison. William took me to see him. Have you heard of the Mutatio in Locis?"

Bethany shook her head.

"It's a way to change positions between our realms. It's only happened once. Goddard was there a couple thousand years ago."

Bethany asked, "Who wants to switch?"

"Remember how Zagan was cheated out of his position?" Bethany nodded, and Zachary smiled. "Don't you think Zagan would jump at the chance to take William's place? Especially if he could humiliate Thamuz in the process? It happens tonight."

"William's leaving?" Bethany asked.

"Not if everything goes right."



*42 For One Night*

“WILLIAM SAID YOU HAVE TO GET UP,” BEN SAID AS HE pushed Bethany’s door open. He froze at the sight of Zachary and Bethany both sleeping in her bed. “What the...?”

Bethany grabbed a book from her nightstand and threw it at him. “I told you not to come in here, Ben. Get out.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” Ben said as he ran out.

Bethany rolled over and saw Zachary yawning. She sat up. “Crap.”

“What’s wrong, Beth?”

She jumped up. “Ben just saw us.”

“Yeah. So?”

“In bed. Together.”

Zachary sat up. “Oh, crap.”

The two of them raced down the stairs and the hall toward the master bedroom. They could hear Ben’s raised voice the whole way. When they ran in, William and Sarah stared at Bethany in her nightgown and Zachary in only jeans.

Ben said, "See what I mean?"

Zachary put his hands up, as if to surrender. "No, no, no."

Bethany was right beside him, saying, "It's not what it looks like."

Ben stood straight. "It's exactly what it looks like." He looked at William and asked, "What're you gonna to do about it?"

Sarah raised her hands to Ben. "Relax, Ben. It's okay."

Ben took a step back. "Don't tell me to relax. They put us all in danger."

"Ben." William stepped toward him. "Nothing happened."

"What are you talking about?" Ben shouted. "I saw them!"

Sarah said, "I can tell you for a fact nothing happened, Ben."

Ben's eyes bounced between each of them. "You weren't there. How do you know?"

"Because if it did," William shouted. Ben froze and William calmed. "We would've all been in the battle."

Ben backed up two steps. He shook his head. "How do you know?"

"Because that's how it happened with us," Sarah explained.

William motioned toward a sitting area in the huge master suite. "It's time we told you what happened." He walked over, grabbed the pillow and blanket from the sofa, and tossed them in the corner before turning and offering them seats. Sarah and William sat.

Ben took a couple of steps then stopped. He narrowed his eyes at Zachary and walked behind him. Bethany and Zachary took a seat on the sofa with the house leaders. Ben sat on a chair by himself.

“Honey,” Sarah said to William. When he looked, she motioned her head toward the door.

“Oh, right,” he said as he went and closed the bedroom door. When he came back, he explained, “We don’t want Claire to hear. It was pretty hard on her.” William took a seat. “We meant to tell you this last night, but...”

“Sorry about that,” Zachary said.

Sarah said, “It’s okay. It may be better this way. I’m sure last night was a lot to take in all at once.”

Ben sat back and crossed his arms. “Get on with it, then.”

William looked at him then back at Bethany and Zachary. A nervous smile flashed across his face. He looked down and said, “This is difficult for us.”

“Just say it,” Ben demanded.

Sarah stood, walked up to Ben, and shoved her finger in his face. “Listen here, you little shit. I’m still your house leader, and if you say one more word, I’ll end you right now. You got that?”

Ben shut his mouth.

Sarah leaned in. “Am I clear?”

“Yes,” Ben mumbled.

Sarah raised the back of her hand and asked, “Was that a word?”

Ben’s mouth opened, and he glared at William who tilted his head. Ben closed his mouth and nodded.

Bethany and Zachary looked at each other.

Sarah stepped back to her seat. “Now, can we continue?”

The three of them nodded.

William clapped his hands and briskly rubbed them together. “As I was saying, this is difficult.” He looked between the kids. “We told you we were set up. Us,” he motioned between himself and Sarah, “getting together was only a matter of time.”

“You mean sex,” Bethany said.

William and Sarah looked at each other and nodded. William said, "You three are fortunate. You have no idea what it's like to be partnered with someone who already shares a connection."

Zachary and Bethany shared a glance.

\* \* \*

As Sarah stood in the hall, listening, she rested her head against the drywall.

"She can't go back, William." It was impossible for Goddard to speak quietly. With such a deep timbre, his voice seemed to resonate through the walls.

"We can stay at my place," William said. "I have security. She and Claire will be safe."

"Listen to yourself," Goddard commanded. "You're as much of a threat as Ray is. Besides, think about it. When she doesn't go home, where's the first place they'll look?"

William stood and paced. "I know. I know. I'm not strong enough to be alone with her." He stopped. "They could stay here."

Goddard put his hands up. "Not Claire, William. No way I'm risking that. I'll take Sarah, but not that child."

"What if I take Claire?" William asked. "I'll leave Sarah here. I don't think he knows about this place yet."

Goddard shook his head. "All of this stops if you just let him have her."

"No," William insisted. "That's not an option. I don't expect you to understand, but I can't lose either one."

"You're letting your human emotions control you."

"Maybe that's exactly what I need," William said as he sat and buried his face in his hands. "What did you tell me that first week? When you embody a human—"

"You get everything that goes with it," Goddard finished. William looked up. "I love her, Goddard."

Sarah sucked in a breath. *William felt it too?* Her heart quickened. She turned her ear toward the room and tried to listen.

Goddard shook his head. “You don’t love her, William. You’re confusing attraction for a feeling you’re no longer capable of.”

“Explain Claire, then.”

“That’s completely different,” Goddard said, waving his hand.

“It’s not, Goddard. Life without both of them—either of them—is unbearable.” He leaned forward and pointed at his chest. “I need them. Not just Sarah. That child you’re so afraid of is worth everything to me. You need to help us.”

“Okay,” Goddard breathed a long sigh. “They can stay here.” He put his hand up. “For one night. You need to deal with her husband.”

“Thank you. Once we deal with her ex-husband, she can go home.”

Goddard narrowed his eyes. “It better be soon.”

A black van pulled onto Goddard’s street and parked a block away. The driver looked at his companion. “You sure this is it?”

“I’m sure,” he said as he looked at his laptop. He pointed to the BMW in the driveway down the street. “It’s that one. Make the call.”

The driver lifted his phone and tapped the first number in his recent call list. “We have it.” He listened. “Not yet.” His companion stared at him, shrugging. He shook his head. “Yes. I understand.” He ended the call. “We do nothing until we confirm the child is here.”

Sarah took a deep breath and walked into the room. William and Goddard snapped their heads in her direction. “She’s sleeping.” She looked at Goddard. “Thanks for letting

us come. I just didn't know what else to do." She glanced at William then looked away. "I had no idea Ray would stoop so low." She lowered her head. "I don't know what I would've done if he would have..."

"Hey," William said as he took her hand. "It didn't happen. She's safe now."

Sarah looked in William's eyes. She tried to stay focused, but caught herself looking at his lips. She brought her eyes back up, but each breath he took drew her eyes down. Forcing her lower lip between her teeth she bit down hard. The pain flashed, breaking her stare. She looked up at Goddard. "Thank you."

Goddard stood and smiled. "That's what I'm here for. You're always welcome." Sarah awkwardly hugged the giant man as he held a single finger up behind her back. He mouthed, "One night."

William nodded.



43 *Breakfast and Plans*

ALL HEADS TURNED AS THE BEDROOM DOOR FLEW OPEN, and Claire ran in towards the bed. She stopped when she saw the covers thrown open and nobody in it. She looked to the left and saw the bathroom light on. She took two steps before Sarah said, “We’re over here, Sweetie.”

Claire turned and wrinkled her face when she saw everyone in William’s bedroom. Sarah put her arms out. Claire ran and jumped in her lap, saying, “Mommy,” wrapping her arms around her neck. Sarah faked a choking sound and squeezed her little girl.

“Careful, Claire.” William smiled. “We just got her back. We don’t want to break her the first morning.”

Claire released her. “Hugs can’t hurt people, Will.” She spun and sat in her mother’s lap, pulling Sarah’s arms around her, then smiled. She looked at Bethany and Zachary, then leaned her head against her mother’s chest and looked up at her. “I’m so glad you’re not a secret anymore.”

Sarah bent down and kissed Claire's forehead. "I'm glad I'm not a secret anymore, too."

"Can you stay this time?" Claire asked as she played with her mother's fingers.

"I'm sure gonna try."

Claire spun and wrapped her arms around Sarah. "I'm gonna try super hard, too."

Sarah held her and asked, "You are, are you? What're *you* gonna do?"

Claire played with the neckline of her mother's t-shirt. "I'm gonna be super good this time. I'll clean my room and eat all of my vegetables." She looked at William. "You can ask Will. I've been real good. Right, Will?"

Sarah pulled Claire's chest against her face and said, "Oh, baby, you didn't do anything wrong. I never wanted to be away from you."

Claire's lips puckered. "Then why did you leave me?"

William leaned over and rubbed her back. "Sometimes grownups have to do things they don't like. Your mom had to leave to keep us safe."

"From the scary ones?" Claire asked.

Bethany and Zachary looked at each other. Bethany mouthed, "Scary ones?"

Zachary shrugged and looked at Ben who shook his head.

"Yes, baby," Sarah said. "I'll do anything to keep the scary ones away from you."

"Well, don't leave again, Mommy," Claire told her. "If they come back, I'll fight 'em."

William stood and reached for Claire. "It's time to get you ready."

As William picked her up, she asked, "Can Mommy take me to school today? I want Mrs. Rose to meet her." She scrunched her face. "I don't think she believes I have a mom." She smiled. "But now she has to."

William held her. “We’ve got a lot to do. Is it okay if we don’t go to school today?”

Claire narrowed her eyes. “I thought you said school’s important?”

“It is,” William responded. “It’s very important. Can Mommy take you on Monday?”

Claire smiled and looked at her Mom. “Really?”

“Absolutely,” Sarah affirmed.

William turned to Bethany. “Can you give her a bath? We’ll get breakfast ready.” He looked at Ben and Zachary. “We have a lot to do. No school for all of you.”

“Awe,” Ben moaned.

Bethany said, “Since when do *you* like school?”

Ben shrugged. “I won’t get to see Anne. She’s got some church thing tonight.”

“Boohoo,” Bethany teased as she took Claire from William. “You’ll see her tomorrow.”

“Who’s Anne?” Sarah asked.

“Ben’s girlfriend,” Bethany quipped as she left the room with Claire.

Sarah narrowed her eyes at William who shrugged and said, “He knows the rules.”

Once everyone was in the kitchen, they all sat around the table and, in true William form, had everything Zachary loved. Zachary had dirtied two plates since William couldn’t keep up with the demand for pancakes, eggs, and bacon all at the same time. Zachary continuously had one in front of him and one waiting for something to finish cooking by William.

Sarah smiled at the way Zachary stuck his tongue in the stream of syrup pouring off of his bacon before shoving the entire thing in his mouth.

“How can you eat like that?” Bethany sneered. “Bacon and syrup?”

Zachary shrugged. “It’s good. Salty and sweet at the same time.”

Bethany grimaced.

Claire copied Zachary. "I like it like that."

"It's good, huh?" Zachary said to Claire.

"Yeah, Beth," Claire said. "It's good."

"You two are gross," Bethany said.

Claire giggled as she slurped syrup off of her strip of bacon.

William slid another plate to Zachary then set a place for himself. Once he sat down, he said, "Zack will meet Redd Blake at the Palace Theater in Springfield by noon. It's three hours away, so we should be back in Inspiration around three thirty." William looked at Zack. "You remember Redd? The one that brought us in to see Goddard?"

Zachary shook his head.

"He'll remember you," William continued. "Just go into theater one. He'll be watching for you, carrying one of those." William pointed at the three brief cases. "It'll take Redd a couple of hours to get back to South Central Correctional in Licking, Missouri."

"Then they bring Goddard to the lake?" Bethany asked.

Ben interrupted, "Why does everybody know about this but me? What does Goddard have to do with anything?"

"That's why we're going over it now, Ben," William said. "We meant to do it last night."

Ben looked at Bethany. "How do you know?"

Bethany shrugged. "Zack told me."

Ben pushed his plate away and stood. "Nobody's really told me what we're doing here. What if I don't want to help?"

Sarah looked at Ben. "You're a member of this house, Ben. We help each other."

Ben took a step back. "Why should I listen to you? I didn't even know about you until last night."

"Mutatio in Locis," Sarah said.

Ben stopped. "Who?"

"Me," William said.

“You know of it?” Zachary asked.

“I’ve heard the term,” Ben said. He narrowed his eyes. “Why do you need Goddard if you’re doing it?”

Sarah and William exchanged a glance. William lifted his chin. “He knows the process.”

Ben narrowed his eyes. “Every affected soul must be present.”

William nodded.

Ben motioned his eyes toward Claire who was licking syrup off of the bottom of her fist and smiling at Zachary. “Even her.”

Sarah nodded, and Bethany whispered, “She can’t be part of this. She can’t see things like that.” She watched Claire dip her tongue in a pool of syrup on her plate, and her eyes softened. “It’s not safe.”

Sarah whispered. “Everyone concerned is required. Even her. If there were any other way...”

“Attendance isn’t the only requirement,” Ben added.

Zachary stopped playing with Claire. “What else?” He looked at William.

William sighed and eyed Ben. “Sarah and I will work on that.” They exchanged glances. “Ben, Sarah will take you, Bethany, and Claire to the lake to get setup.” He looked at Zachary. “We leave at nine. We have to be there before Redd is. They’re taking a huge risk falsifying transfer documents to get Goddard down here. If they sense anything off, the whole thing could be blown.”

“Uncle G’s coming?” Claire asked.

“Yeah, baby,” Sarah said. “He’ll meet us at the lake. We’ll talk about it on the way.”

“Yay,” Claire exclaimed. “How come he never visits to our new house?” She frowned. “I didn’t like his house.”

“It’ll be fun to see him at the lake, right?” William asked. Claire nodded. “So you go with Mommy and get it ready. She has some really important stuff to tell you about what

we need to do to help Goddard. Can you listen extra good today? It's real important."

"I can do that," Claire said as she held her hands up. "I better wash. These are sticky, and Uncle G hates messes." She climbed down then ran upstairs.

Ben watched Claire disappear then turned. "There's no way she can give a verbal consent. His words will be gibberish."

"Let us worry about Claire," William said, as he put his arm around Sarah. "Just think of your answer, Ben. Everyone must consent." William looked between Zachary and Ben. "Tell me now if you don't agree."

Zachary looked sideways at William then turned to Ben. "This is what William wants. Okay?"

Ben looked at William. "I'll agree if that's what you want."

Sarah reached for Ben's hand and squeezed it. "Thank you, Ben." She released his hand.

William patted Ben's back. "Good, now go up and get ready."

Ben looked at the floor then back up at William. "I'll miss you." William smiled as Ben walked up the stairs.

When Zachary heard a door upstairs close, he moved close to William and asked, "Why didn't you tell him about Goddard?"

"The less he knows, the better. We leave at nine. Everything needs to be ready at the new day."

Zachary's eyes looked up as if he was trying to solve a puzzle.

William smirked. "That's six o'clock in this time zone."



#### 44 *The Note*

WILLIAM AND ZACHARY DROPPED TWO SMALL GYM BAGS next to the others in the foyer before walking into the kitchen where Sarah and Claire were packing food into a wicker basket.

Claire picked up a package of Oreos. “Make sure there’s room for these.”

“Geez, Claire,” Ben said. “This isn’t a picnic.”

“Ben.” Sarah glared at him.

Claire scowled at Ben. “We’re having food at the lake, Ben. That’s a picnic.”

“She’s got ‘ya there, Ben,” Bethany laughed. “That’s pretty much the definition.”

Sarah pushed some stuff around in the basket. “Put ‘em right there, Sweetie.”

Claire put the cookies in and stuck her tongue out at Ben.

As William grabbed a couple of sandwiches from the stack, he told Zachary, “Get some for yourself. We leave

in ten minutes. And grab something to drink.” Sarah gave Zachary a sack, and he packed some sandwiches, fruit, and a couple bottles of water.

Bethany said, “I don’t see why we all have to get wet.”

“Mommy said we’re all going swimming,” Claire said. “It’ll be fun.”

“I’m just saying,” Bethany said, looking at William. “I didn’t have to get all the way in when I picked up Zack.” She looked at Zachary and rolled her eyes. “I wouldn’t have got my hair wet if you wouldn’t have flailed around like a freak.”

Zachary shrugged.

“Just wear a swimsuit,” Ben said. “That’s what I’m doing. The only thing in my bag is a towel.”

Bethany looked sideways at Ben. “I’m not wearing a bikini when,” she looked at Claire and lowered her voice, “the Great One’s gonna be there.”

“Who cares what you’re wearing, Beth,” Ben said. “It’s the lightning I don’t like. Electricity and water sounds like a bad plan.”

“I said it’s ‘like lightning,’” Bethany corrected. “It’s just a flash. Trust me, I had my feet in the water when Zachary was born.” She shook her head. “No electricity, Ben. The Selfish One’s the only one who can actually control lightning.”

“There’s gonna be lightning?” Claire asked. Her mouth hung open.

“No lightning,” William comforted her as he stroked her hair and swept it over her ear. “More like fireworks. Remember the Fourth of July over the lake?”

The concern remained on her face. “I didn’t like how loud it was.”

William lifted her chin. “The colors were nice though, right?”

She nodded, but didn’t relax.

“There will only be one,” William said. “It won’t be scary. I promise.”

“Okay,” she said.

A rapid knock on the front door caused everyone to stop. Claire jumped and ran to the door, as she wondered aloud, “Why are you guys always scared of the door?”

She opened it, and Zachary recognized the voice that spoke. “Is Zack here?”

Zachary jumped and ran to meet Norman Green.

Mr. Green quickly asked, “Is she here, Zack? Please tell me Emma’s here.”

Zachary shook his head. “No. She left after she dropped me off. Are you okay?”

Norman Green thrust the piece of paper Emma left on his chair the night before towards Zachary and rubbed his hand over the back of his neck. “I need to find her.”

Zachary looked at the note.

*I'm sorry for everything, Daddy. I need  
you to know I'm doing this to make  
everything right again. People need to  
know the truth. He needs to be stopped.  
I don't expect you to forgive me, but I  
want you to know I love you more than  
the whole world.*

*With all the love I have,*

*Emma*

“What is this?” Zachary asked.

“I thought you knew,” Mr. Green responded. “It was on my chair when I woke up. Who’s she talking about, Zack?”

Zachary quietly answered, “Sam.”

“Samuel Wheat?”

“We found out he’s been taking money for a while now,” Zachary said.

Mr. Green shook his head. “You must be talking about someone else. Sam would never...”

“Emma has the evidence, Norman,” Zachary said. “He’s the one that made the payments for your wife’s treatments.”

“No.” Norman shook his head and backed away. “You’re wrong.”

Zachary walked toward him. “He set it up using your information and signed your name on the checks. He was the only other one on the documents. He set you up, Norman.”

Mr. Green turned and ran toward a sedan idling on the street with an older man sitting in it. He got in and slammed the door.

Zachary dropped the note and sprinted toward the car. He reached for the door handle. “Norman! Wait!” It was locked. He stared at Norman and put both hands on the glass. “Tell me where she would’ve gone.”

“Here.” He turned to the older driver and said something Zachary couldn’t make out. The car drove off, leaving Zachary staring at the back end of a Buick.

“I think I might know.”

Zachary spun to see Bethany standing on the path with the note in her hands.

“Come on.” She turned and ran toward the house. Zachary caught up with her as they ran through the door. Bethany sprinted through the kitchen and said, “We need to take your car,” to Sarah.

Bethany snatched the keys out of a bowl next to the garage door, but William grabbed her wrist. “Where do you think you’re going?”

Bethany tried to wrench her wrist free, but he held firm. Zachary clamped onto William’s wrist and squeezed. “We need to find Emma.”

“I told you, Zack.” William practically drilled a hole in Zachary’s face with his eyes. “You can find her after tonight. This is too important.”

Zachary clutched William’s collar and slammed him against the cupboards. “We’re finding Emma.”

“Stop it!” Sarah shouted.

Bethany twisted and tugged against William’s grip. “Emma needs help! I have to go!”

William’s face grew red. “You can’t leave me, Beth! I need this! We need it!”

Claire ran to William, slammed her fists against him, and shouted, “Let them go, William! They have to help Emma!” He looked down at Claire’s face as tears streamed down her cheeks. “We have to help the people we love.”

William froze and released his grip. Bethany and Zack stared at him. William looked in Zachary’s eyes. “Do you love her, Zack?”

Zachary nodded. “I do, William.”

William slowly looked at Bethany. “And you?”

Bethany blanched. She narrowed her eyes and asked, “What do you mean?”

“Do you love her?”

Bethany looked at Sarah then at William. “I don’t know.”

Sarah took two steps toward Bethany. “Just say it.”

Bethany took a step back and stared at the ground. She looked at Claire then shook her head. “I mean... if she needs something, I want to help.”

Sarah took another step forward. “Even if it means you lose everything?”

Bethany looked down and drew her eyebrows together. “Maybe?”

Claire looked up at Bethany. “That’s what love is, Beth. Helping someone even if it’s bad for you.”

Bethany ran her hand over Claire’s hair. “I guess I do, Claire Bear.”

Claire wrapped her arms around Bethany, laid her head against her stomach, and said, "You have to help her, Beth." She looked up and rested her chin on Bethany's belly. "I love her, too."

Sarah and William exchanged a glance. He opened a drawer, grabbed a set of keys, and tossed them to Bethany. As she looked in her hand, William motioned his head behind him. "In the back garage."

Bethany ran her thumb over the BMW logo. "We have another car?"

William smirked. "You and Zack were gonna start driving sometime."

"Cars?"

William nodded. Bethany smiled then turned and opened the door. She and Zachary ran through the garage to the opposite door as William called after them, "Be at the lake before six." They both stopped and looked back as Sarah walked up behind William and put her arm around him. Claire wrapped her arms around Sarah's thigh and leaned her head on her mother. William said, "I mean, help Emma, then meet us at the lake."

Zachary nodded, and they both went through the door and headed toward the back yard. Behind the pool area, there was a separate garage Zachary didn't know about. Bethany lifted her arm, aimed it at the double garage door, and pressed a button. The door slowly opened, revealing two black BMW 5 series cars.

Bethany smiled. "Now, that's what I'm talking about."



45 *Invitations*

BEN SHOOK HIS HEAD. “YOU JUST LET THEM GO? WE ALL have to be there for the ritual, William. Zagan is preparing now.”

William eyed Ben. “How do you know Zagan is the recipient?”

Ben raised his chin. “You’re the one that told us Zagan was next in line.”

William and Sarah exchanged a glance. William nodded. “You’re right. I did say that.” He grabbed his keys from the bowl. “Since Zack’s gone, you’re with me, Ben. Grab the food. We have to go.” William took one of the briefcases and his sandwiches then motioned toward the garage door. Ben looked at him for several seconds before snatching the sack lunch and water bottles and opening the door.

William motioned toward the two remaining briefcases and said, “Don’t forget to bring them.” Sarah nodded as William and Ben closed the door behind them. They got in the Escalade and left.

Sarah turned to Claire. "I guess it's just you and me today."

Claire smiled.

\* \* \*

"Where are we going?" Zachary asked.

Bethany navigated a sharp turn. "Remember that first day? At school? I introduced you to some girls."

"Not really."

"Not surprising. You were a newborn. Anyway, those girls used to be Emma's best friends." Bethany shrugged. "When she had friends. I figure if she didn't go home and she's not with you, where else could she go?"

Bethany pulled in front of a small house near the center of town. "This is Celeste's house. Wait here. I'll find out."

Zachary jumped out and started running up the pathway.

"Okay," Bethany said to herself. "We'll both go, then." She threw her door open and reached the porch as a woman opened the door.

"Is Emma here?" Zachary quickly asked.

The woman stared at Zachary, and Bethany calmly said, "Hi, Mrs. Emerald. Is Celeste available?"

The woman stepped aside. "You know the way."

"Thank you," Bethany said. The two of them went through the living room and down the hall, heading toward a door with a sign on it that read, "Celeste's Room. Enter at Your Own Risk."

They threw the door open then stopped in the doorway. A blonde girl was standing in front of a full-length mirror wearing only a bra and panties as she swayed back and forth holding a dress up to her. Three other dresses were draped over the chair next to her. The earbuds must have been loud since they could hear the music that was clearly blaring in her ears. Bethany walked up to her and tore the buds from her head.

“Mom!” Celeste shouted as she turned and dropped the dress. Her eyes grew wide as they landed on Bethany. Horrified, she snatched one of the dresses off the chair and covered her body. “Oh. What’s up, Beth?” She looked around Bethany and noticed Zachary staring at her. “You didn’t say you brought company.” She lowered the dress, revealing her body for Zachary, and stepped to the side. “Hello, Zachary. Welcome to my room.”

Zachary walked up to her. “Have you seen Emma?”

“It’s too bad about you and Emma, Zachary,” Celeste said. “If you ever need someone to talk to, I’m right here.”

Bethany asked, “Was Emma here?”

Celeste tilted her head. “She was earlier.” She turned, slowly walked to the chair, and put her hands on it. “She came to borrow a dress. She always said I have the best taste. She seemed like she was in a hurry.” She picked up two of the dresses and turned toward Zachary. “I was thinking of wearing one of these for tonight.” She held each one up to her body. “Which one do you like?”

“Did she say where she was going?” Zachary asked.

She held a flowered sundress up. “I think this one. The pastor says he likes it when I look... more innocent. What do you think?”

“Where did she go?” Bethany repeated again.

Celeste scowled. “She said something about Brooke.”

Zachary and Bethany turned and ran out of the bedroom. Celeste called out after them, “You can come by after the dedication tonight, Zachary. See you, then?”

Zachary and Bethany went through the front door without stopping. Mrs. Emerald turned to see her daughter standing in the doorway in her underwear. Celeste scowled at her mother and slammed the door.

As Bethany drove through the streets, Zachary asked, “Why are you helping me?”

She glanced at him as she drove. "I'm doing this for Emma and you, stupid."

"Why?"

Bethany pursed her lips and stayed silent for a moment. "I've been watching people for centuries. I mean, we both have, right?"

"Yeah. Obviously."

"In all that time, I've never really paid attention." She looked at Zachary. "Then, I saw her with you. Don't get me wrong. At first, I wanted to peel her skin away slowly and pour lemon oil on the bare tissue, but then, I started seeing her differently."

Zachary's eyes were wide.

"Relax, Zack. I said something changed."

"What changed?"

"She's the real thing, Zack." Bethany smiled. "It's like, no matter what we throw at her, she stays her. She forgives without thought, gives beyond her ability, and cares more than people deserve. She loves with ferocity, Zack. Her mother, her father, her friends, and even the town that abandoned her."

She pulled to the curb and stopped the car. "She loves you. And that makes me love her." She gripped the steering wheel and stared at her feet. "My story can't have a happy ending." She looked at him. "I'll be damned if I won't do everything I can to give her one. If that means I'm stripped of form and cast out, it's worth it if it makes her happy, if only for a little while."

Zachary reached and swept Bethany's hair over her ear. "Want to know what she said about you?"

Bethany huffed. "Oh, God." She shook her head. "This is gonna be good."

Zachary gently rubbed her neck. "She said you're the most amazing person she knows."

Bethany wiped a tear and sniffed. “She said that?” Zachary nodded, and Bethany wrinkled her forehead. “I’m sorry for being such a bitch to her.”

“Well,” Zachary admitted. “She also said you’re rude and super sarcastic, too.”

Bethany laughed and wiped another tear. “I guess I deserve that.”

“Yeah, you do.”

They both looked as a pretty girl with long light brown hair walked out of the house they were parked in front of. She was holding a folder against her body.

Zachary turned to Bethany. “Brooke?”

Bethany nodded, and they both got out. The girl stopped as they ran up to her.

“Hey, Beth,” Brooke said. She looked Zachary over and said, “Sorry about you and Emma, Zack. I just heard.”

“Was Emma here?” Zachary asked.

A car pulled up behind theirs, and Brooke said, “I gotta go. My ride’s here. You can come by after the dedication tonight, if you want. I mean, if you need to talk or something.” She raised her eyebrows. “You’re coming to the ceremony, right? Pastor Coal asked me to sing. He said he loves my voice.” She bit her lip. She reached her free hand down her blue lace A line sundress and pinched the fabric with her thumb and forefinger. “Do you think this looks okay for the ceremony? Heath said he likes me to wear something that makes me look... younger.” She tilted her head. “That’s not the word he used. Maybe it was—”

“Innocent?” Bethany asked.

Brooke’s eyes lit up. “Yeah! That was it. Do you think he’ll like it?”

Bethany nodded slowly and gave a thumbs up. “You nailed it.”

Brooke smiled. “Thanks. Anyway, gotta go.” She turned to get in the car.

“Wait,” Zachary said. “Emma was here?”

“Oh, yeah. A little while ago.” She lowered her voice and took a couple steps toward them. “She borrowed shoes and some,” she whispered, “unmentionables.” She stood straight. “Weird, right?”

“Did she say where she was going?” Bethany asked.

“That’s the other weird thing,” Brooke responded. “She was going to the Gray’s ranch. She hasn’t been there since Blake and her...” She drew her finger across her throat.

Zachary and Bethany both said thanks then ran toward the BMW.

“Come see me tonight,” Brooke called out as they raced away.



46 *A Lapse in Judgment*

BEN WAS QUIET FOR THE FIRST HOUR OF THE DRIVE TO Springfield. The longer they drove the farther he slumped in his seat.

William looked at him and asked, “You okay with all of this?”

“Not really,” Ben said, as he stared out the side window.

“That’s fair,” William said.

Ben sat up straight. “It’s like... all this happened before you asked me to join your house.” Ben turned in his seat so he faced William. “And all along you planned on abandoning me?” He looked down. “If I’d known, I might not have...” He lifted his head. “Did Beth and Zack know?”

William shook his head. “No.”

“How could you not tell us? I mean, this changes everything.” Ben fiddled with his fingers. “Zagan’s gonna be a newborn.” He wrinkled his forehead. “What about his promises? Will he even have authority? Who’s gonna take his place?”

“Listen, Ben,” William said. “You don’t have anything to worry about. This will be good for you. You have to trust me.”

Ben lowered his head and slowly shook it, as he said, “I don’t know who to trust anymore.”

“You can trust me, Ben. And you can trust Goddard. You hear me?”

Ben looked up and didn’t speak.

“Did I tell you what Goddard did for us?” William asked. Ben shook his head and William said, “I told you about how he let us stay there that night?”

Ben nodded.

“It turns out Sarah overheard when I told Goddard I was in love with her, but she pretended she didn’t hear,” William started.

\* \* \*

“There you go,” William said, as he propped her suitcase on a chair in the extra bedroom. He walked over to one of the two doors along the far wall. “See... this isn’t so bad. His and hers closets.” He opened one and turned around. “Um. Not a closet.”

Sarah smiled.

“Your own private bathroom,” he said. “I’d say this is more like a suite.”

Sarah tried to smile, but she collapsed sobbing.

William rushed to her and sat on the bed. She leaned into him and he held her, letting her cry. She wrapped her arms around him and laid her head on his shoulder.

“I’m sorry I’ve been so much trouble for you,” she said.

“Hey,” he said, as he pulled away. He touched her delicate chin and turned her face toward his. “This is my fault. Not yours, Sarah. I was so stupid.”

“No,” she said. “We both let him choose the bodies. I just had no idea...”

“I know. I didn’t either.” He swept the hair from her face and tucked it behind her ear. He knew he should take his

hand back, but her skin was so perfect. He traced her jawline with the tips of his fingers. He felt her shiver and said, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have—"

"It's okay."

William focused on her lips, then on her eyes. "No. I shouldn't touch you. I can't..." Sarah's hand slowly reached toward his face. He caught it, held it, and looked into her eyes. The warmth of her breath caressed his lips. His breaths came in rapid succession. He'd worked so hard for so long to keep her at a distance, and now she was too close to ignore.

Each breath brought her familiar scent. Something indescribably sweet he never could place. He'd named it the scent of Sarah, and tried to keep its lure a secret from himself. He closed his eyes and tried to focus on what was important. Sarah and Claire's safety. The warmth of her body crept into his mind. He opened his eyes and her warm brown eyes glistened in the dim room. Her lip trembled and he could see her quick pulse in her slender neck.

"You are so beautiful," he said, immediately regretting this small confession.

He watched her eyes dance between his mouth and his eyes as if she was trying to see every part of him at the same moment. She held him slightly closer and all of his attention fell to her breast warming his side as she held him much too close.

William closed his eyes and gained his energy. He stood and said, "I should go."

Sarah regained her composure and sat up straight. "You're right. I should get some sleep."

William looked at the beautiful, frail, frightened woman sitting on the bed. If he'd have known how much he would want her, need her, feel lost without her, he wouldn't have worked so hard to convince her to join him in this task. If he hadn't been so arrogant he may have been able to save himself from this torment.

He had to be strong. The great Thamuz was not going to be destroyed by Zagan. And there was no way he was taking Naamah down with him. He turned and started walking. “Good night, Sarah.”

“I heard you talking to Goddard,” Sarah said. William paused and Sarah stood with her shoulders caved in and clutching her wrist over her heart.

William stared at the door.

Sarah took a small step toward him. “I’ve been afraid to say anything.”

William’s head dropped. He looked at his feet and stood his ground.

Sarah sucked in a breath and swallowed. “But now I’m afraid to go one more second without letting you know.” She took another small step toward him. “I—”

“Don’t,” William said.

“What you said down there. Did you mean...?”

William raised his head and clamped his eyes shut. “It’s better if you just forget it.”

Sarah took one more small step toward him. Her legs felt as though they would give out at any moment. She held her arms to her chest and tried to slow her heartbeat. She’d never felt so completely exposed. “I don’t care what happens now.”

William felt the wall in his heart crack. He trembled as a piece fell to the floor.

Sarah’s voice quivered. “Nothing else matters, but you and Claire.”

William quivered at the sound of another piece hitting the floor. He began shaking his head.

“I need you to know before it’s too late.”

William braced himself for the avalanche.

“I love you, William. I can’t do this one more second without you,” Sarah said through her tears. “You have to stay with me. I *need* you to stay with me.”

Everything within William crumbled to the floor and he turned. She closed the gap, and for the first time their lips met. He'd dreamed of this moment, dreaded this moment, longed for this moment, and all anticipation had paled in comparison.

The warmth of her mouth sent a thrill through him. Each time her tongue met his he felt a warm rush. Her hands wound through his hair as his followed the curve of her spine. His hands took over as he spread his fingers over her. He couldn't get enough of her against him.

Without breaking contact he lowered her to the bed. His body rushed as his heart pounded with every movement. He needed more and she obliged, wrapping her legs around his waist. He shivered as her hands touched his skin under his shirt, and pulled it over his head.

She put her hand on his chest and slightly pushed him up. He looked at her and she smiled. In one swift motion she peeled her shirt off and pulled him to her. His body flashed as their skin made first contact.

Goddard sat on the couch downstairs with a glass of wine. He startled when he heard a noise upstairs. He put his glass down and stood slowly walking toward the stairs. He heard some whispers and another sound. William hadn't left yet. He didn't want to walk in on something, so he decided to head upstairs to bed.

Sarah rolled on top of William and lifted her hips to remove her panties. She laid herself over him and he moaned into her mouth as they kissed and rolled. Sarah broke the kiss unable to take it anymore and unbuckled his pants and hooked her fingers around the waistband of his slacks and boxers. She ripped them down and stood on her knees on the bed admiring his body. She ran her hands up the length of his form and made every effort to touch every inch of him with her entire being.

“I love you, William Sable.” She marveled at the way his hands found every part of her and knew exactly where to go.

“I love you so much, Sarah. I’ve always loved you.”

Sarah lifted off of him and placed herself as if she knew how his body worked with hers. She lowered herself and they both arched their backs and began moving together.

Goddard was half way up the stairs when he heard a quick scream followed by a muffled cry. He dashed up the stairs and was in the hall at the guest bedroom door Sarah was staying in when he heard another muffled cry from down the hall.

“Claire,” he said to himself. He took one step and a man holding Claire stepped into the hallway.

Sarah collapsed on top of William and breathed hard. “Oh my God,” she said as she smiled at William.

He slowly rocked his body against her and said, “Oh my God is right.” He held her face gently with both hands and kissed her softly. “I love you.”

She laid her head on his chest and smiled. “Mmmm. I want to hear that all day.”

He stroked her hair and said, “Be careful what you ask for. You may get tired of hearing it.”

“As long as it’s you, I promise I’ll never tire of it.”

Goddard said, “Put the girl down and leave this house. Trust me. You don’t know who you’re dealing with.”

Sarah turned over and sat up. “Did you hear that?”

William put his arm behind his head and admired Sarah’s back. He traced her spine with his index finger. “I didn’t hear anything.”

She put her finger to her lips. “Sh.”

“You don’t know who you’re dealing with,” another man said, as he walked out of the bedroom and raised a Glock 42.

William and Sarah jumped out of bed. Sarah threw her shirt on and William pulled his slacks up. They ran to the door and opened it as the shot rang out. All they saw was a

*Douglas Pershing*

flash of blood and Goddard's body landing on the hall floor  
in front of them.



47 *Finding Pete*

ZACHARY TAPPED HIS FINGERS ON THE DASHBOARD. “HOW far is this place?”

“Technically, we’re already on the Gray’s ranch,” Bethany replied. “The house is just beyond that hill.”

As they crested the hill, a large, white farmhouse came into view. Beyond the house, Zachary could see a long, white structure large enough to hold the entire town square with room to spare. Bethany pulled the car around a wide circular drive flanked by immaculately manicured landscaping.

A woman pruning a rose garden stood and stared at the unfamiliar BMW as it parked near the house. She walked toward the car as Bethany put it in park and shut the engine off. When Zachary and Bethany got out, the woman stopped.

“Blake doesn’t want to see you, Bethany,” the woman said with nostrils flaring like something putrid had assaulted her. “Just take your new gentleman caller and leave my boys alone.”

“Is Emma Green here?” Zachary asked.

The woman raised her chin. "The Green's aren't welcome here."

"Mom!" Blake shouted from the side of the house.

The woman, apparently Mrs. Gray, huffed and stormed inside.

Blake walked over, sized up Zachary, and told them, "Don't mind her. Mom's a tad snobbish."

Bethany smirked. "A tad?"

"Come back to the barn," Blake said as he led them around the side of the house. "Sometimes, my folks'll jump in to everyone's business even if they ain't got no dog in the fight."

Bethany and Zachary looked at each other. They walked into the barn, and Zachary's mouth dropped open as he looked at the sheer size of the building. Maybe they could fit two town squares in this place.

"Emma came by 'bout half-n-hour ago," Blake said. He looked at Zachary. "How are you doing? To tell the truth, when she told me about you two, I was hoping she wanted to get back with me." He kicked dirt against the wall. "I ain't lying when I say I was mad as a mule chewing on bumblebees when I found out what her daddy'd done. It weren't long 'fore I started feeling bad about dropping her, especially after losing her mom that same week. I know she didn't have nothing to do with it."

Bethany asked, "Did she say why she came by?"

"Oh, that." Blake reached under his cowboy hat and scratched his head. "It was the strangest conversation."

"Why?" Zachary asked.

"She never did like that my daddy and I go off on hunting trips," Blake said. "But she asked specifically about Pete."

"Pete," Bethany quickly said. "He was on her list, Zack. Remember?"

Zachary nodded. "Who's Pete?"

Blake smiled. "Pete ain't a who. It's a what." He waved his hand. "Come on. I'll show you." He walked about thirty yards and opened an empty horse stall. "This is where we keep the hunting stuff." He walked to a shelf. "Pete's my favorite." He lifted a lid on an old tool box. "Huh. It ain't here." He looked around. "I swear it was here earlier."

"What is it?" Bethany asked.

Blake drew his eyebrows together. "Pete's the Bowie knife I use to skin my kills." He shook his head slowly. "She hated the thought of us killing deer."

Zachary asked, "Are you sure it's not here?"

Blake looked around and rubbed his jaw. "Why would Emma take Pete?"

"Did she say where she was going?"

Blake shrugged and shook his head. "No idea. She just drove off in her daddy's truck."

"Did you see which way she went?" Bethany asked.

Blake pointed toward the front of the barn. "We ain't got but one road out here. That's the one you came in on. You prob'ly passed her on the way in."

As Zachary and Bethany turned to leave, Blake said, "I'm sorry Brad was such an ass to you, Bethany."

She stopped.

Blake took a step forward. "I never would've done that to you. I can't image what it was like having a life like that. Takes a real jerk to try and take advantage."

Bethany turned and looked at him sideways.

Blake lowered his head. "Not that I'm any better with the way I treated Emma." He looked at Zachary. "I'm glad she found someone like you, Zack. Sorry for the way we've been treating you. Emma really likes you. I hope things work out."

Zachary hesitantly said, "Thank you, Blake."

Blake looked at Bethany and removed his hat. "I know I don't deserve a chance, but do you think... maybe sometime... I could treat you to a movie or something?"

Bethany cocked her head.

"I know I shouldn't be asking, bein' that I look like I been rode hard and put up wet," Blake said, holding his hat on his hip. "But I just ain't had the courage to ask 'til now. I promise if you say 'yes,' I'll take it as slow as you wish. Maybe slower." He smiled. "What do ya' say?"

Bethany thought about it. She looked at Zachary. He shrugged. Bethany smiled nervously. "I'll think about it."

Blake put his hat on, tipped it, and smiled. "That's all I ask." He pointed toward the road. "With that fancy car of yours, you might could catch up with Emma before she gets back to town."

Zachary and Bethany got in the car and drove away from the Gray's farmhouse with Blake waving goodbye until they were out of sight.

Zachary turned to Bethany. "I think you have a date."

Bethany tried to hide her smile. "Shut up."

\* \* \*

Sarah looked at Claire through the rearview mirror. "Let's just go over it one more time. Okay?"

"I can't get it, Mommy," Claire complained.

"It's really important, Sweetie," Sarah said, as she looked at her daughter's reflection. "You want to help Uncle Goddard get home, right?"

"Yes," Claire said as she rolled her eyes. "When the big voice comes from the sky, I say Mootah... tis... annie... missaddy... sent... or."

"Try to say it all together," Sarah said. "Mutatis animis adsentior."

Claire asked, "What does it mean, anyway?"

Sarah looked at her daughters reflection. "It means *Let Uncle Goddard come home*. Can you try it again?"

"It's too hard, Mommy. I can't do it."

"I know you can, baby. Let's just try it once more."

"Mootatis... annie... missaddysent... eeor."

"Mutatis animis adsentior," Sarah repeated.

"Mootahtis ... anniemiss ... addysenteeor," Claire said.

Sarah smiled. "That's almost it. Keep practicing." Sarah noticed several cars in line on the road to the lake. "That's good, baby. Keep trying," as Claire repeated the phrase. She whispered to herself, "What's going on up here?" She fell in line with the procession and rolled her window down.

She drove up to a man directing traffic and asked, "Pardon me, what's going on up here?"

The man smiled. "Unless you've been living under a rock, everybody knows about the dedication tonight."

"Let's say I've been under a rock for a few months," Sarah replied. "Am I going to be able to get to the lake today?"

The man leaned in close to the window and wiggled his fingers toward Claire, "Hi, Sweetie. You just need to get to the lake?"

"We're having a picnic," Claire informed him.

"A picnic? That sounds like a lot of fun." He backed up. "Just take the road on the right a hundred feet up. It should be clear all the way to the west side of the lake. The whole town's going to the new church building dedication to the left. You should have the entire west side to yourself today."

"We have some people joining us shortly," Sarah said. "Can you make sure they know where we'll be?"

The man saluted. "Anyone not going to the ceremony will be directed your way." He wiggled his fingers at Claire. "Have a nice picnic."

Claire smiled and waved.

Sure enough, the road to the west side was clear of all traffic. Sarah wondered if William knew about this when he planned to meet here for the ritual. After about a mile, she found the place marked on the map and parked the car.

“Is this it?” Claire asked. “Can I go swimming?”

“Let’s get our things setup first, okay? Hopefully, the others will be here soon.”

“Then swimming?”

Sarah smiled. “Then swimming.”

“Yay,” Claire said as she jumped out of the car.



48 *Goddard and an Angel*

BEN CLIMBED INTO THE ESCALADE, BUCKLED HIS SEAT BELT, and folded his hands in his lap.

“Did it go okay?” William asked.

“Other than him having no idea who I was and me handing him a briefcase full of money?” Ben gave William a deadpan stare. “You could’ve told me I was carrying a payoff. This is totally illegal; isn’t it?”

William left the parking lot and headed back toward the highway. “I’m sorry. Zack was supposed to do this.”

“I still don’t get why he has to be there, anyway.”

William thought about telling Ben the real reason for Goddard’s presence. Goddard would take William’s place at the ritual. William and Sarah would remain the actual house leaders, while Zagan lived out Goddard’s prison sentence for his entire commission. Once Goddard returned to his true form as Rahab he would take his position among the Solutos and protect the house of Thamuz on Earth.

His choice to place Tiamanicus as Zachary in his house had worked exactly as expected. Most Whisperers fell into the trap of believing their own lies. What Tiamanicus had learned over time was to surround himself in truth.

Once Zachary had experienced humanity for himself, he would learn of the beauty of imperfection and his need for others as well as the need for God. Emma Louise Green had taught him to love. Now, he could understand William's need to protect Sarah and Claire.

William opened his mouth and said, "Ben..."

As Ben looked into his eyes, William second-guessed himself. Something about the way Ben looked made him wonder if this was all a mistake.

"What? You were gonna tell me about Goddard?"

"Right," William said. He stared out the windshield and rubbed the back of his neck. This highway was way too familiar to him. He thought for a minute.

Why was Ben so familiar with the *Mutatio in Locis*? The process for a soul of a Talker to change places with that of a Whisperer had only been performed once over two thousand years ago. Rahab was there as a high legion commander, so it made sense that Goddard would know the procedure. But Ben?

"You said it yourself," William continued. "Everyone affected must be there. Remember Sarah and I belong to the house of Rahab. Wouldn't Goddard be affected?"

Ben thought about it. He nodded his head. "I guess that makes sense. So that's why we have to make sure he's there? Otherwise, Zagan couldn't actually take your place."

William nodded. "See, I knew you'd understand."

"So you said Goddard was shot. Why is he in prison?"

"Well," William started. "That's where Sarah and I came in." William looked at Ben. "You may have guessed that we..."

"You had sex; didn't you?" Ben asked.

William nodded.

“Did the angels see you?” Ben wrinkled his forehead. “I thought you’d be...?”

William’s face grew serious. He drew a long breath. “We would have. If Goddard wasn’t there.”

\* \* \*

At the sight of the blood spreading across Goddard’s chest, William stumbled backward, and Sarah screamed and fell to her knees watching. She drew her hands to her face and realized the impact had splattered a fine red mist over her.

As if in slow motion, she swung her head to the right and saw a man in black walking toward her, swinging a dark handgun across his thigh. As he stepped, she caught sight of her little girl fighting against another assailant. She watched the man’s face contort as he pulled his hand from her mouth.

Claire screamed, “G! Mommy!” as she kicked and threw her arms wildly.

Sarah cried out, “Baby!” as she scrambled to her feet. She felt every ounce of oxygen escape her lungs as the black weapon lifted, and she found herself staring down the dark cavern of the barrel.

The world caught up with her as the gun swung away.

“What the hell?” the man in black said.

William wrapped his arm around Sarah as the gunmen took several steps backward.

Goddard stood in the hall, looking at William and Sarah. The intruder shot him in the stomach this time, but Goddard just glared at the gunman. He looked at William and Sarah and shook his head. “This isn’t going to be good.”

Sarah’s face drained of all color.

“Mommy! Uncle Will!” Claire screamed.

“Hit him again!” the man holding Claire shouted.

Goddard took two steps toward the gunman. The man took three steps backward and raised his weapon when the

hallway flooded with light. A great wind whipped dust and debris through the hall, and everyone fell against the walls.

The man holding Claire let go of her, preparing to defend himself against whatever was happening. She fell to the ground and buried her face in the carpet just before the ceiling vanished. Two beings far too bright to gaze upon descended. Sarah and William blocked their eyes and attempted to stand. The gunman stood, held his arm over his face, and braced himself against the wall.

The beings of light bore their eyes into Sarah and William. This was the consequence they deserved. William and Sarah held one another, dropped to their knees, and fought to keep their eyes open.

The would-be kidnappers struggled against the force of the wind. Goddard stood and leaned into the torrent, brushing aside the papers, seat cushions, and small furniture that pounded him. As the gunman raised his weapon, Goddard made his way to the man and pulled the object from his hand. He tossed it into the breeze, and it was whisked away.

Above them, the clouds swirled. Goddard looked up and knew the fate William and Sarah faced when the angels had finished with them. The couple held each other and watched their enemies swarm above like vultures waiting to cleanup after the kill.

The two beings of light unsheathed their celestial steel blades and raised them high. They came down across the wall and split the structure.

*They missed?* Goddard wondered.

William released Sarah's hand and began to stand.

"Don't leave me!" Sarah shouted, unsure if William could hear.

He nodded and held her tight. They looked at each other and silently decided they would be vanquished together.

The two beings of light stood tall and swung their blades down on opposite sides of the two huddled demons. Goddard pulled his eyebrows together as he wondered how the angels could have missed a second time.

William buried Sarah's face in his chest and held her tight. The angel directly in front of the huddled couple stepped forward and began a long swing toward them. Goddard released a long scream then clutched the gunman's chest and threw him toward the angel. As the angel's blade came around them, the man flew through the air, catching the steel blade.

The gunman cried out as the blade caught his left hip and worked its way through his right ribcage. His torso landed against the wall next to the angel. As his separated legs fell three feet away, the angel screamed in anguish and dropped his blade.

Goddard watched the sword fall to the floor, and he stared into the angel's eyes. Goddard shouted, "Don't let them coax you out!" He sprung off the wall and dove toward the sword. As he skidded down the hall, he reached for the hilt. When the celestial weapon came in contact with his human flesh, he screamed in agony. He forced back the pain and raised the blade. He swung it through the torso of the grieving angel. The angel fell, and its light dissipated, replaced by a piercing shriek as its life force fled.

"They can't harm us as long as we're human!" he screamed before turning toward the second angel.

The demons circling above the house screamed and cheered as they swarmed the newly vanquished soul. The remaining angel peered into Goddard's eyes, sheathed his sword, and vanished. With the angel gone, the light receded, and all evidence of the other realm dissolved.

Goddard fell to his knees, watching the celestial weapon dissipate in his grip. He turned and looked at the man cowering in the corner mumbling incoherently. Claire

jumped to her feet, ran to Sarah, and buried her face in her mother's chest. Sarah rocked as Claire's chest heaved.

Goddard looked at the face of the dead man staring at him then turned to William and Sarah. "You need to leave."

William looked toward Goddard. "We can't. We have to—"

"No!" Goddard shouted. He pointed at Claire. "You need to protect her. And Sarah." He looked around the house. "I'll deal with this. Just go."

Sarah and William nodded and got up. They rushed to grab anything they could reach then ran down the stairs and out of the house. They jumped in the BMW and drove away with Claire and Sarah laying in the back seat, holding each other and crying.

The neighborhood erupted in chaos as people ran onto the street, pointing at the house. The kidnapper peeked out the window at the end of the hall and saw the crowd forming and a police car skidding to a stop in front of the house. When he turned, he saw the huge man hunched over, holding his burned hands to his chest.

Goddard stood and stumbled toward the stairs.

"Hey," the man said from behind him.

With his eyes half open, Goddard turned just in time to see the broken leg of his hall table catch him across his face, splitting his cheek. He crumpled down the stairs, and the man stumbled over him and ran out the front door.

"He's in there! Help me! He killed Frank!" He fell into the policeman's arms and cried, "He cut him in half. Please don't let him kill me. He's crazy."

Goddard laid with his feet at the top of the stairs and his head halfway down. A warmth spread across his cheek. He touched his face and flinched. As he put his hands down and tried to right himself, the police ran in with their guns drawn.

\* \* \*

*Inspiration*

Ben's mouth hung open. "He vanquished an angel?"  
William looked at Ben. "That's why the Solutos will welcome him despite the failure during his commission."



49 *Emma's Prayer*

“THIS IS SO COOL,” EMMA TOLD EDDIE AS SHE LEANED OVER the large desk. She knew the boy’s attention would be on her, so she blocked his line of sight and slid Blake’s hunting knife Pete into the second drawer.

“I know, right?” Eddie said as he took a step back and admired the way her jeans fit. Being a techno geek at the college hadn’t earned him much attention at the university. Maybe this new gig would change things for him. With the new building actually about to open, it seemed his luck had changed. For one, he had a job. And second, he had no idea church girls could be so hot.

Emma straightened and turned. “So where does it go when he records something?”

“That’s the cool thing. It creates a new file directly on the solid state drive in the A/V room.” He pointed his finger at the ceiling. “From there, it’s backed up directly to the cloud.”

“Then you have to get it ready for playback?” Emma asked.

“No,” Eddie said. Emma furrowed her brow. “I mean... we don’t have to do anything. It’s available immediately. A cue from the director, and it’s sent anywhere in the building or everywhere if he wants.”

Emma raised her eyebrows. “Even the one outside?”

Eddie shrugged. “All of them.”

Emma looked around the lavish new office of Pastor Coal. Heath had really outdone himself. It was filled with rich, dark furniture, built-in bookcases, and a large four-pane sliding glass door that opened to a private deck over the lake. The room was completely equipped with video controls so he could create personalized greetings while sitting in his oversized leather office furniture. Eddie had shown her how Heath could display the feed on a monitor above the bookcases and zoom and pan by moving a joystick.

She looked around the room. “So that’s the only camera?”

“Well, Mr. Coal—”

Emma touched her index finger to the college boy’s lips. “Pastor Coal,” she corrected.

Eddie smiled shyly. “Right, I need to get used to that. Pastor Coal didn’t see a need to show any perspectives other than him.”

Emma drew her finger to the boy’s chest and shook her head. “I don’t suppose there’s any point showing anyone but him. But why is it hidden?”

Eddie looked at the camera and tilted his head. “I guess it is kinda hard to see, but that’s because he didn’t want to distract from the decor.”

She smiled. “Makes sense. Thank you so much....”

“Eddie,” he reminded her.

“Right, thank you for showing me around, Eddie,” Emma said as she picked up the garment bag she’d slung over the leather loveseat. “This place really is amazing. Who would’ve thought to put a baptismal with lights and everything right in the lake?”

“That was Mr. C...” Eddie stopped. “Um, Pastor Coal’s idea. He thought if the weather was good it made sense to baptize people in the natural surroundings. He’s going to try it out tonight.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, Pastor Coal thinks ending the ceremony with a baptism would top the night off.”

Emma tilted her head. “I suppose it would. When is that?”

“Last thing tonight.”

“That’ll be nice.” Emma held her arms up, making a show of the garment bag. “Well, it’s getting close. Where can a girl get ready?”

“Oh, right.” He looked at his watch. “I didn’t realize it’s so late. I need to get the doors open.” He ushered her out the door and pointed down the corridor. “It’s down there. You can’t miss it.”

Emma turned without saying anything and walked quickly.

“Wait.” As Emma turned, he asked, “Will I see you later?”

Emma smiled. “I guarantee it.”

She started to turn, and Eddie said, “You didn’t tell me your name.”

Emma eyed the college boy. “Celeste. Celeste Emerald.” She turned and walked down the large corridor.

“Great.” He waved. “See you tonight, Celeste.”

Emma closed the door behind her and leaned against it. She locked it and leaned her head on the door. *Great. Let’s add lying to your growing list of sins, Emma.* She closed her eyes. *Heavenly Father. Forgive me. I just don’t know what else to do.* She sniffed and wiped her arm across her face. *If You have a plan, I sure can’t see it right now. How could everything get so out of control?* She turned and leaned against the door, holding the garment bag against her.

She squeezed her eyes shut. *Thank you for showing me daddy's innocent, but Sam?* She stood straight, wiped her face and looked in the mirror. *Please, Jesus. You know I'll do anything to make everything right again. If there's another way, let me know. Show me.* She walked to the counter and stared at herself. *If it's Your will... I will sacrifice myself.* She squeezed her eyes tight. *Father. I dedicate myself to You in every way. Please use me to bring this town back to Christ. Save my friends, my family, even those that hate me, and show them You are the only true path to salvation.*

*And Lord, I lift a special prayer up for Zachary and his family. Thank you for bringing such a special group of people into my life. Please let Zachary forgive me for what I'm about to do. Thank you for having him show me what real love looks and feels like. He's been a testament to Your love in my life. All of these things I pray in Jesus' holy name. Amen.*

She opened her eyes and said, "Forgive me, Daddy."

She went into a stall, hung the garment bag, and quickly unzipped it. She pulled out the crisscrossed mesh paneled pumps Brooke got online from Forever 21 and set them on the floor. The Pink label was still attached to Brooke's newest underwear collection as she hung the matching black lace strapless bra and cheeksters on the wall of the stall and started to get undressed.

When she finished dressing, she stepped out of the stall and looked at herself. The mirrors in the women's restroom were arranged so she could see herself from three angles. The dress Celeste ordered online was absolutely beautiful. The black fabric was interrupted by sheer illusion cutout strips that revealed her upper chest while just covering her bra. Two strips displayed her stomach and another two displayed nearly too much of her thighs. The heels were just high enough to force her calves to flex as she walked. She felt both elegant and sexy.

As she gazed in the mirror, she pictured Zachary's face. She loved the way he looked at her. He made her feel attractive and worthy at the same time. How did he do that? It made her want him in ways she'd never felt. Blake was nice enough. Cute. He never forced anything on her, but he also never made her want him. Something about Zachary was different. She wanted him. She wanted him to want her.

When she looked back in the mirror, she realized she was smiling. Then she remembered she wasn't wearing this for Zachary. It was for Heath. Her face hardened. "What a waste," she said. She shivered at the thought of touching him, of him touching her.

Someone knocked on the door, and Emma sucked in a breath.

"Is someone in there?" a woman asked.

"Coming." Emma gathered her clothes and stuffed them in the garment bag. When she opened the door, one of the ladies from church gave her a harsh look. "Sorry," Emma said as she skirted by the woman.

As the door closed, Emma heard the woman quietly say, "Dirty thief, whore," under her breath.

Emma watched the door close; then, she turned and walked with her head up. There was nothing she could do for herself anymore. She was a lost cause. But she would reveal the truth about her father. His daughter may be remembered as a whore, but Pastor Green would be redeemed regardless of what she had to do.



50 *At the Lake*

“WHERE DO YOU THINK SHE WOULD GO?” ZACHARY ASKED Bethany as they drove away from Emma’s house.

“How am I supposed to know?” Bethany asked. “She’s your girlfriend. Maybe she went to work.”

“No paper today. Sam already gave Merna today’s edition. The only story was that new building thing. He had it finished yesterday.” Zachary shut the door and sat in the car.

Bethany closed her door. “What about what you told her dad this morning? Maybe she went to see Samuel?”

“I already told you. No paper today.”

Bethany gripped the steering wheel. “Well, I’m out of ideas, and it’s”—she looked at the clock on the dashboard—“nearly 4:30. We need to get to the lake for William.”

“Wait. Can you head to the town square?”

Bethany started the car and backed out of the driveway and headed towards town. “I thought you said, ‘No paper today?’”

“Sam’s daughter works at the coffee shop. Maybe she knows where Sam is.”

When they got to the square, nearly every parking spot was empty. “What’s up with the ghost town today?” Bethany asked.

“It’s over there.” Zachary pointed. He saw Liddy walk out of the door and turn to lock it. “That’s her. Stop here.”

Zachary jumped out and ran up to her. “Liddy, have you seen Emma?”

Liddy turned and said, “Oh. Hi, Zack. Sorry. I haven’t seen her today. Have you tried the lake? The whole town’s there tonight.”

Zachary grabbed both of Liddy’s shoulders. “It’s really important.” He looked at Bethany then back to Liddy. “We don’t have much time. Please, do you know where she could be?”

Liddy’s eyes grew wide. “What’s wrong? Has something happened?”

“I hope not,” he said. “Do you know where Sam is? It’s important.”

Liddy shook her head. “My dad? Why?”

“I know this sounds strange, but...” Zachary drew a long breath. “Emma found some stuff about things Sam was doing.”

Liddy straightened and looked at him sideways. “What kind of things, Zack?”

“It’s hard to believe, but she found all this evidence about companies Sam created and wrote checks to with the church money. Sam was the one who wrote the checks for Emma’s mom. It wasn’t Mr. Green.”

Liddy looked at Bethany with trembling lips.

Zachary continued, “Then, Emma left this note about making everything right again...”

Liddy looked back at Zachary. “Right again?”

“Yeah. When Mr. Green showed me the note, I told him everything, and he started yelling and drove off.”

Liddy’s hand flew to her mouth. “You told Norm?”

“Well, yeah. He wanted to know what Emma needed to fix. I assumed it had to do with Sam.”

“Oh, my God. Dad.” Liddy turned and ran toward the newspaper building. “Dad.”

Zachary and Bethany exchanged glances and ran after her. Liddy was already in the building when they caught up. The lights were on, and the paper folder was still running, but the feeder had run out of paper. Liddy was cautiously stepping through the broken glass outside of Samuel’s office.

Zachary ran to her. She turned and her chest was heaving.

Liddy turned to Zachary. “I need to get to the lake.”

Bethany asked, “What’s at the lake?”

Liddy backed away. “That’s where he’ll take him.” She stepped through the office door, being careful not to touch the broken window. “I need to talk to Heath.”

Zachary jerked his head back. “Pastor Coal?”

Liddy looked at Zachary. “What?” She looked around the room.

Bethany took two slow steps toward Liddy. “What about Pastor Coal, Liddy?”

Liddy’s eyes darted around the room. “Did I say something? Weren’t you looking for Emma?” She took a few slow steps toward the door before looking back at them. “Um, I have to get home. To... let my dog out.”

She walked quickly toward the back door and left Bethany and Zachary staring at each other. They ran to the door just in time to see Liddy run around the corner.

Bethany looked at Zachary. “To the lake?”

Zachary nodded slightly. “Yeah, we’re going to the lake.”

They ran back to the square and sped out of town.

\* \* \*

Sarah breathed a sigh of relief as she watched William's Escalade park next to her Mercedes. "Cutting it kind of close, aren't you?"

William stepped out of the car. "I'm sorry. Everything took longer than it should have." He thumbed back to the road. "Wish I would've known about that mess. Anything from Zack and Beth?"

Claire ran up to Ben and grabbed his hand. "You're here, finally. Go swimming with me."

"Hang on, Claire." Ben rubbed his eyes. "Give me a chance to wake up."

Sarah shook her head at William. "Nothing. Have you heard?"

William hung his head. "I'm so stupid. What was I thinking?" He looked at Sarah. "I should've given her another phone. I was trying to teach her a lesson."

Sarah wrapped her arms around him and said, "They'll be here."

"Here or not. We need to get ready." William looked down the road. "They should have Goddard here in a half-an-hour. If they can get through that mess."

"Come on," Claire said to Ben. "I've been waiting all day. Mommy, Ben's being a slow poke."

Sarah turned to Ben. "Can you please get in the water with her?"

"I forgot my swim suit," Ben replied.

"You said you were going to wear it," Sarah said.

"Zack and Beth messed everything up. I was gonna change before we left, but I had to go with William to do Zack's job. I forgot."

William spun and looked at Ben. "Just take your shirt and shoes off and get in the water. You're going to get wet tonight anyway."

Ben scowled at William then tugged his shirt over his head. He sat on the picnic bench and pulled his shoes off. "I hate wearing wet clothes."

Before long, Claire was squealing as Ben threw her as high as he could and she splashed into the lake. She sprung out of the water screaming and laughing. Ben laughed as he swept her up and tossed her again.

William paced as the minutes flew by. Finally, Sarah looked up at him and said, "They'll be here."

As a white panel van came into view, William jumped and said, "They're here." He turned. "I'll talk to them. Stay here." When the van parked next to the other vehicles, he walked up to it and said hello to Redd and Pete. He leaned into the window and saw Warden Wesley Aero sitting across from Goddard who was chained to his seat.

The Warden spoke up. "Redd and Pete both wanted to turn back when they saw the crowd. You'd better have our money."

"I have it," William said. He ran back to Sarah's car and motioned for her to unlock the trunk. She pushed the button, and the trunk opened. William took out one of the briefcases.

"All of it," Redd shouted.

"That's not the deal," William complained.

"The deal's changed," Redd said. "If you want us to stay, we want the rest."

William glanced at Sarah. She looked at Redd's face then nodded. William grabbed the other briefcase and walked them both to the van. Pete ran around and took them from William. He laid them on the ground then opened both of them and flipped through some of the bundles. He looked at Redd and nodded. After he closed them, he ran around and got into the van.

"Satisfied?" William asked.

“You’ve got thirty minutes,” Redd told him. “Where do you want him?”

William pointed farther down the road. “Around that corner is another cove. He needs to be in the water. Not by it. In it. Do not take his ankle chains off for any reason.”

“Don’t worry. He ain’t getting his chains off,” Pete said.

“I’ll come around and tell you when we’re finished,” William said. “He’ll act confused. He may not even know who he is.” He held his hands out. “Don’t worry. He’ll be fine. Just make sure he stays chained.”

William leaned into the window and looked at Goddard. “You ready for this?”

Goddard nodded.

The warden and the two guards exchanged confused looks and drove away.



## 51 *Setting the Stage*

AFTER PASTOR COAL WALKED OFF THE STAGE, HE SHOOK hands with the mayor of Inspiration. The mayor quieted the crowd and began to speak of the great strides the church had made to improve the community.

As Pastor Coal settled into the background, Emma tapped his shoulder from behind. He turned his head and opened his mouth to say something, but she held her finger to her lips and motioned for him to follow her. She led him to a hidden area then faced him. A shiver ran through her as he scanned her body.

“Why, Emma Louise,” Pastor Coal said. “I didn’t know you planned on attending tonight’s celebration.”

The crowd laughed at something the mayor had said and Emma forced a smile. “I’m here for you, Pastor Coal.” The words tasted like bile. “I thought tonight could be... special. Like we talked about.”

“Well, Emma,” Pastor Coal said as he motioned behind him. “I’m a little busy at the moment, you see. Maybe after tonight’s festivities?”

Emma closed the gap between them and put her hand on his chest. “I know you’re busy, but maybe you could find a moment for me?”

Pastor Coal turned his head to make sure he wasn’t being watched. He smiled and pulled her around a shrub. “You know I’ll make time for you whenever I can.”

“Will you, Heath?” Emma stepped back a couple steps. “Do you like my dress?” She turned her back to him. “I wore it just for you.” She turned her head and put her finger in her mouth. “I can’t wait to show you what else I’m wearing.”

Heath gulped. “Did you get a tour of the building?”

Emma nodded.

“I have a meeting, but I’m free directly after the baptism. Can we meet in my office?”

Emma walked up to him and slid her hand along the front of his slacks. “Wouldn’t it be amazing if we could have our special time *during* the celebration?”

Heath sucked in a breath as she squeezed her hand. He looked around again then reached his hand in his pocket and pulled out a bunch of keys. “Here.” He held one up and placed it in her hand. “Wait for me in my office. After Brooke sings, we have several testimonies. I’ll slip away, and we’ll make this the most memorable night of your life.”

Emma held the keys up. “Don’t let me down, Pastor Coal. I’ve been waiting for this for a long time.”

As she turned and walked toward the building, Pastor Coal adjusted his clothes, took a deep breath, and stepped back into the line of church elders.

Emma shed her false smile as she walked toward the large building entrance. Jingling the keys in her hand, she said, “Well, Heath. If nothing else, this will be memorable.”

Emma entered through the open doors, aimed her eyes at the floor, and walked quickly.

“Emma?” a perky voice called from behind.

Emma looked up to see a small girl. “Anne?” Emma looked at little Anne Carmine. She had her hair up and looked younger.

Anne put her hand to her mouth. “Emma. O. M. G. You look amazing.” Anne walked around Emma. “That dress is so beautiful.” She bit her lip and said, “Has Zack seen you yet? Because, if he hasn’t...”

“Me? Look at you,” Emma said.

Anne slowly spun, and Emma took in the sleeveless fingertip length dress. It was all lace with a sweetheart front, a layered skater skirt, and a completely sheer back revealing her lack of a bra, like she really needed one with her petite form.

“Do you like it?” Anne asked with a smile. “I got it for tonight.”

“What’s the special occasion?” Emma asked.

Anne held her lips together and her hands fidgeted. She bounced on her toes and rubbed her hands.

“Come on,” Emma said. “You know you want to tell me.”

Anne’s cheeks flushed. “Okay.” She grabbed Emma’s hand and pulled her into the nursing mom’s room and closed the door. “You have to promise you won’t tell anyone. Okay?”

“Sure,” Emma slowly said.

Anne leaned in close and whispered, “Because girls can be... you know... jealous. But I know I can trust you.”

Emma’s skin pricked.

Anne smiled. “Pastor Coal says he thinks I have the most potential of any girl in the whole town.” She clasped her hands together and leaned her cheek on them. “He said now that I’m old enough I can be the Daughter of Inspiration. I can make a real difference here.” She lowered her voice. “I’m meeting him here tonight. Isn’t that amazing?”

Emma took a step forward and pasted a smile on her face. *Was this the meeting Heath was talking about?* She took Anne's hands. "That's amazing, Anne."

Anne bent her knees and practically jumped. "I know, right?"

"Can you do something for me?"

Anne paused. "Of course."

"Will you wait until after the baptism to meet with Pastor Coal?"

"Why?" Anne stood straight. "He wanted to meet me earlier."

"He's having a really busy day with the ceremony and all. He asked me tell you he has a special task for you; then, you can meet him."

"He said that?"

"Yeah. It's really important."

Anne tilted her head. "What is it?"

"Pastor Coal is going to record a special message for the baptism tonight. He needs you to tell the director to play it on all of the screens."

Anne furrowed her brow. "How will he know which one to play?"

"Oh, that's the easy part," Emma said. "He hasn't recorded it yet. Tell them it's the newest one from Coal. Eddie'll know where to find it. Can you tell him?"

"I guess so."

"Perfect. Thanks, Anne." Emma held Anne's arms. "You really do look amazing." Emma pulled Anne into a hug. "I love you, Anne."

Anne lowered her eyes. "I love you too?" It was more of a question than a statement.

As Emma opened the door, she said, "I'll see you later, Anne."

Emma walked down the corridor toward Heath's office. Her heart pounded as she reached the door. She unlocked it

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and stepped inside. After closing the door and looking at the floor, she took a deep breath, knowing after tonight nothing would be the same.



52 *Take Me to the Water*

SARAH LOOKED AT HER WATCH, AND WITH TREMBLING hands, she tucked her hair behind her ears as the lake breeze fought her for control. She watched William pace. “Get in with Claire and Ben. I’ll make a quick run around the lake. Maybe they can’t find us.”

“It’ll take all of us,” William said. “I’ll go with you.”

“No,” Sarah responded. “We just need to be in the lake, right?” William nodded, and Sarah embraced him. “We’ll all be in at six.” She turned and ran to her car. “I promise. I’ll find them.” She got in and raced down the lake road.

“Hey,” Ben shouted. “Where’s she going?”

William turned and walked into the lake toward Ben and Claire. “She’s going to find Zack and Beth.”

“This won’t work without everybody,” Ben reminded him.

“Since when are you so concerned with the ritual?” William asked.

“I don’t know.” Ben shrugged. “If you want to do it, maybe a change in leadership could be good for me.”

William walked up to him and took Claire. “Really? How could it be good for you?”

“Well,” Ben said. “I was thinking about it, and he’d be like the newborn. That could be good is all.”

William stared at Ben. “Has he promised you something?”

Ben’s eyes danced between the water and some distant trees. “No.” He looked up at William.

William smiled. “You’re a terrible liar, Ben.”

Ben shook his head quickly. “I’m not.”

“Make sure he can actually deliver on his promises,” William said as he hoisted Claire in the air.

“Throw me, Uncle Will,” Claire squealed. She screamed as she flew into the water.

William turned to Ben. “Remember—if this doesn’t go quite how he planned, you’re still going to be here.”

Ben looked at him sideways.

William scooped Claire out of the water and stared at Ben. “With me.”

On the other side of the lake, Sarah saw Zachary and Bethany getting out of the BMW in the back of the church parking lot. They started to run toward the building, so she skidded to a stop and jumped out. “Beth! Zack!” she shouted. They both turned and waved their arms. Sarah ran over to them and breathlessly said, “It’s almost six. We need to get to the lake.”

Zachary splayed five fingers. “Five minutes. I promise we’ll be there.”

“We have to go now,” Sarah said.

Zachary looked at the church and pointed. “There he is.”

Samuel sprang from his truck, leaving the door open. He hobbled toward the large building. Zachary and Bethany

ran to intercept him while Sarah struggled to keep up. As they all reached the entrance, a man stepped out to block their passage.

“Sarah White,” the man said flatly.

Sarah stepped back and her hands flew to her mouth. “Ray?”

Zachary and Bethany both looked at Sarah.

“Mr. White?” Zachary asked as he watched the Whisperer circle around his teacher’s head.

Sarah shook her head violently. “You can’t have her, Ray. She’s all I have left.”

Mr. White took a step forward and raised his palms. “If I wanted Claire, I would’ve taken her a long time ago.” He lowered his hands. “This is about you, Sarah. It’s always been about you.”

Mr. White looked at Zachary and Bethany. “Such a nice little family William has surrounded himself with.” He focused on Sarah. “I knew if I waited long enough you’d eventually show yourself. And look at this. Here you are.”

Sarah backed up, holding her arms across her chest. “You don’t want Claire?”

Mr. White laughed. “I already figured it out, Sarah. Claire’s not mine.” The muscles on his neck tightened. “And every second I look at her throws it back in my face.”

“What are you talking about, Ray?” Sarah asked.

Zachary stepped between them to protect Sarah, but stopped when he saw Mr. White reach behind his back and pull out a small handgun. Zachary raised his hands as the demon spoke into the teacher’s ear. The demon looked between Mr. White and Sarah. That meant Sarah was exposed. She wasn’t invisible to Whisperers.

Bethany’s voice quivered. “Mr. White? What are you doing?”

Mr. White held the weapon at his side. “I can’t get the image out of my head, Sarah.” He raised the gun, and they

all flinched. He scratched the back of his head with the butt of the gun and continued, "You... William... and Claire. *His* child."

Zachary and Bethany looked at each other.

Sarah shook her head. "No, Ray."

Mr. White raised the gun, his hand shaking as he looked down the barrel at Sarah. "Admit it!" he shouted. His finger twitched on the trigger as the Whisperer prodded him. "You took everything from me. Admit it, Sarah!"

Sarah fell to her knees and put her hand in front of her face. "Okay, Ray." She looked up at him. "You're right. You're right, Ray." She pinched her lips together and stood. "But it was your fault."

Mr. White's face contorted. "My fault? How is you having another man's child my fault?" He shook his head violently. "How does that even make sense?"

Sarah took a step forward. "It's all your fault, Ray. Sarah didn't cause you to lose your tenure." She took another step forward. "Your affairs did that."

Mr. White shook his head. "Stay right there. I'll shoot."

"You're the one that pushed Sarah into William's arms. You didn't love her."

"I did. I did love you, Sarah. I still love you."

"Does a man who loves his wife jump into bed with every freshman looking for an easy grade? Was she supposed to sit around and do nothing? Of course, she filed for divorce. Of course, she went to the Dean, Ray. What did you expect her to do?"

Mr. White wiped his arm across his forehead. He blinked his eyes several times. "You're trying to confuse me." He waved the gun and took a step back. "Stop it. You did it. You took everything from me."

Sarah stood with her chin up. "What're you gonna do now, Ray? You gonna shoot her? You gonna shoot the woman you love?"

Music started playing through the speakers in the church foyer as Raymond White clutched the small weapon to his head. He stretched his arm straight. The sound of a beautiful girl's voice sang softly in the background, praising Jesus to a percussion-powered waltz.

Ray's face went blank as he looked in Sarah's eyes. When the pulsating rhythm announced the first chorus, Raymond White pulled the trigger, and the projectile entered Sarah's side. She fell to her knees, clutching her gut. She lifted her hand and looked at the wound as Zachary and Bethany ran to her and put their arms around her.

Mr. White gasped as he clutched his head with both hands, still holding the gun. He tucked the gun in his belt behind his back and ran into the church, mumbling incoherently.

Bethany said, "We need to get her to a doctor."

Zachary lifted her arm. "Get the car. I'll help her."

"No," Sarah said. "We don't have time."

Zachary looked at Bethany. "Go."

"No," Sarah repeated as she pushed herself to her feet. "Take me to the water."

Zachary and Bethany slung Sarah's arms over their shoulders and helped her limp to the side of the building.



53 *Plan B*

EMMA JUMPED AT THE KNOCK ON PASTOR COAL'S DOOR. SHE closed her eyes and took a deep breath. *Last chance, Emma. Be sure you really want to do this.* Brooke's voice sounded amazing through the quiet speakers on the ceiling. Soon, several key church members would be giving testimonies, most likely praising the *amazing* Pastor Coal.

Knock. Knock.

She remembered how her friends Celeste and Brooke worried so much about what Pastor Coal would think of how they looked tonight. Then, little Anne Carmine nearly echoed the words Pastor Coal had told Emma a couple of nights ago. "*Girls can be so jealous.*" "*He likes it when I look innocent.*" No wonder her friends didn't hang out anymore. "*We'll need to keep it private for now.*" There were too many secrets in Inspiration. Hopefully, what Emma did tonight would save Anne Carmine from becoming one of Coal's "Daughters of Inspiration." Emma wondered how many had been taken in by the smooth-talking snake.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

She thought about her father sitting in his recliner, writing sermons that would never be heard. She loved him and the town too much to keep the true Word of God from Inspiration again. She opened her eyes and whispered, "Let's do this," as she started the recording. She got up and walked toward the door.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

This time it was louder. Emma stopped when she heard voices in the hall. She stepped closer.

She heard Samuel's voice. "He knows."

"Calm down, Sam," Heath's muffled voice said. "Just what are you talking about?"

"Norm." Samuel's voice sounded frantic. "He knows everything."

Emma jumped as something slammed against the door. She couldn't make out the whispered words on the other side, but she stepped back as the handle moved. *It must lock automatically*, she thought. She looked back at the desk where she'd left the keys. Three light knocks rapped on the door.

"Emma," Pastor Coal said calmly. "I'm here. Can you open the door?"

She heard more whispers she couldn't make out as she reached for the handle and twisted it. She jumped back as Pastor Coal pushed Samuel inside.

"Emma," Samuel begged. "Please, you have to tell him it wasn't me. Heath—"

Pastor Coal shoved Samuel toward the desk and swung around to face her. He placed his hand low on her back and guided her toward the open door. "I'm so sorry. We'll have to do this another time. Please forgive me."

As he pushed her out, she saw Samuel staring at her. She grabbed the handle, but it didn't budge. She slapped her hand on the door and said, "No, no, no, no. This isn't right." She looked at the floor. Her breaths were shallow and quick.

This was the perfect time, her chance to let all of Inspiration know just what kind of man the good Pastor Coal was. “Damn it, Sam. You’re messing this up.”

She paced the hallway several times and tried the door again. “Ugh.” Brooke’s voice was louder in the hallway as the song ended on a long, high note. Emma looked up as she heard the applause. “Brooke,” she said, and she ran the path Eddie had showed her, a back way to the green room. Up ahead, she could see Celeste heading backstage. Emma yelled, “Celeste, I need to—”

Emma was hit from the side and she slammed into the wall next to Celeste. Celeste screamed as Emma fell next to her and a handgun slid between them. The girls looked at the gun then each other. Both looked across the hall and saw Mr. White scrambling to get up.

Mr. White froze with his hands still on the floor and his eyes shifting between his weapon and the girls.

“Mr. White? Are you okay?” Celeste asked.

He darted toward them, and they both dodged him as he scooped up his weapon and tucked it behind his back. He put his hands out and said, “Sorry,” before running down a side hall.

As Emma got up, Celeste shook her head and said, “That was weird. Are you okay?”

Emma rolled her neck. “I think so.” She took several breaths and looked at Celeste.

“Since when do science teachers carry guns?” Celeste asked.

Emma sucked in a breath then grabbed Celeste’s hand and dragged her along. “We need to talk to Brooke.”

They pushed through the door and ran through a narrow hallway.

Celeste asked, “Why are we running? These shoes are not exactly made for this.”

When Emma threw the greenroom door open, several people turned their heads. She let go of Celeste's hand and took three long steps toward Brooke. She grabbed her hand and pulled her toward the door. "We need to talk."

Emma pushed Celeste and Brooke into the hallway and let the greenroom door close.

"What are you doing?" Brooke asked. She straightened and smiled. "Did you hear my song?"

Celeste nodded.

Emma grabbed both of Brooke's hands. "It was amazing, Brooke. You always are."

Brooke smiled and pulled her hands away. "Wow, Emma. That dress is so pretty."

"It's mine," Celeste said. "Promgirl.com. I let her borrow it."

Brooke nodded. "Nice."

Celeste looked down and said, "I love the shoes you picked."

"Mine," Brooke said. "Gojane.com."

"Killin' it," Celeste said as the two girls high-fived.

Emma looked at her friends. "I need to ask both of you something. You need to be honest, okay?"

"Sure, Emma," Celeste replied.

Brooke nodded.

"Have either of you met with Pastor Coal... privately?"

Brooke furrowed her brow and crossed her arms.

Celeste's head jerked back. "Why are you asking?"

"I just need to know. We used to tell each other everything. And now..."

Brooke shook her head. "Well, I can't talk about it."

Celeste narrowed her eyes at Brooke. "You can't talk about it because it hasn't happened."

Brooke dropped her arms. "Well, this is probably why I'm not supposed to say anything."

Celeste's eyebrows pulled together. "You're not supposed to say anything?"

Emma clutched both of their arms. "Did he tell you to keep it private for now?"

Celeste and Brooke looked at Emma.

Emma asked, "Because girls can be so jealous?"

Brooke's mouth dropped open. "How did you know?"

Celeste sucked in a breath and looked at Brooke. "You slut. He said I have the most potential. Not you."

Emma stepped back from her two best friends. She was right. Coal had been playing with all of them, and now, fourteen-year-old Anne was his latest target.

Brooke clenched her fists. "He told me I'm his favorite. You stay away from him."

Emma cringed at the sound of Celeste's hand across Brooke's face. Brooke's mouth hung open as she pulled her hand up to the growing pink mark on her cheek. She closed her mouth and looked at Celeste, quietly saying, "I'm late."

Emma stared silently.

Brooke held her stare. "For what?"

Brooke glared at Celeste and repeated, "I'm late." She leaned against the wall. "I was going to tell him tonight. After the celebration."

Celeste covered her mouth. "Oh, my God. Are you sure?"

Brooke slid down and sat against the wall. "I'm never late. I was going to go to Jasper Creek and get a test tomorrow to make sure, but"—she pulled her lips together and nodded—"I'm pretty sure."

Celeste kneeled in front of her. "You're not going alone."

Emma got down on her knees and said, "We'll all go," before wrapping her arms around her.

Celeste sat back on her feet and asked Emma, "Was he doing you, too?"

Emma shook her head. "No. He told me if I did, he would make my dad's problems go away." She rubbed

Brooke's shoulder. "I didn't realize what was going on until I talked to Anne today."

Celeste looked at Emma. "Who's Anne?"

Emma took a breath. "Anne Carmine. She was Ashton's girlfriend. They just broke up."

Celeste tilted her head. "Blake's little brother? He's like fourteen."

"I know," Emma responded. "She told me Pastor Coal said all the same things he said to me." The muscles in her neck tightened. "He told her she's old enough to be the Daughter of Inspiration."

Brooke looked up. "That's what he called me."

"Humph," Celeste said. "Sounds like he called all of us that. So... fourteen is old enough? How could I be so stupid?"

Brooke buried her face in her hands. "What do I do?"

"You have us, Brooke," Emma consoled her. "You're not alone."

Celeste straightened her back. "What do we do to him?"

"I had a plan, but Sam screwed it up. I was going to get the good pastor to admit to everything about my dad and the other girls." Emma chuckled. "It was going to be perfect. Right there on the big screen for everyone to see."

"What about your dad?" Brooke asked.

"That's a long story." Emma breathed a heavy sigh. "It turns out Sam was the one that took the church money, but I know Pastor Coal was involved. I just couldn't figure out how."

"Wait," Celeste said. "Sam took the money?"

"Yeah, evidently someone told my dad, and he went to Sam. That's why Sam's here right now. I overheard him say Norm knows everything. He was totally freaked out. I'm sure it's about the money."

Brooke shook her head slowly. "What happened to this town?"

"Heath Coal," Emma replied.

Celeste asked, "You were going to out him tonight, right?"

"Yeah, but that didn't work out."

"Let's do it," Celeste said. "Tonight. In front of everyone. He can't deny it if we're all here. Maybe some other girls will say something."

"I don't know." Brooke lowered her eyes. "My parents are here."

Celeste lowered her head and looked at her. "Like they'll never find out you're pregnant?"

Brooke pulled her arms around herself. "Well, I don't know for sure yet."

"I'll do it with you," Emma said. Brooke nodded.

"Outside," Celeste said. "When everyone's on the steps. Agreed?"

Emma nodded, but Brooke lowered her eyes.

Celeste put her hand on Brooke's arm. "My parents are here, too. Please, do this with me. We have to stop him."

Brooke looked at Emma and Celeste then nodded her head.



54 *It Begins*

CLAIRE CLUTCHED BEN, HER NAILS DIGGING INTO HIS BACK. As her eyes scanned the gathering clouds, she begged, “Ben, we have to go. They’re back.”

Ben held her and looked into her eyes. “It’s okay, Claire. I’ve got you.” Ben looked at William who was pacing on the shore. “We have to start, William.”

William looked down the empty road then at the clouds. “She said she’d be here.” He looked at Claire’s trembling face. “We all have to be here.”

Claire’s eyes met William’s. “I wanna go home. Please, Uncle Will,” she cried. “Don’t let ‘em come again.”

Ben looked up and said, “Sarah or not, he’s coming. Sarah said she’d be there for you.” Ben looked across the lake then his eyes focused on William. “Trust her. She’s found them, and they’re in here with us.”

William closed his eyes tight and said, “Don’t let me down, Sarah.” Then, he turned and walked into the water. So many things had gone wrong. With the way Pete and Redd

acted, he wasn't sure Goddard was even there. Why didn't he have them stay here where he could watch them? What did it really matter if they witnessed the process? They wouldn't comprehend it.

William took Claire and held her. "It's okay, baby. They're not here for you."

"No, Daddy," Claire cried as she shook her head. "They hurt people. They'll hurt you and Mommy. I don't want 'em to come. I'm scared." William held her and looked at the boy next to him.

Ben took several steps back, shook his head, and pointed his finger. "She's your daughter?"

"Yes," William confirmed.

"You should've told us. This changes everything." Ben's eyes grew wide. "You don't intend to go back. That's why you needed Goddard."

William grabbed Ben's arm. "You need to do this."

Ben shook his arm loose. He stood in the water and smiled. "Oh, yeah. I'm gonna do this." He took a step toward William. "I never intended to dissent. I just had to make sure the odds had shifted."

William narrowed his eyes.

"Zagan knew you would try to fool him. He expected it." Ben pointed up. "When he comes. You're not going anywhere. You never were." He stepped forward and stood as tall as his fourteen-year-old body could. "The birth will happen tonight. Just no departure. Goddard or you."

William held Claire's crying body close. "What did you do, Ben?"

"I told that guy in the theater not to trust you. It turns out the Mutatio doesn't work quite as expected if all parties aren't present. That's where my commission came in." Ben turned his back and waved his hand in the air. "I just needed to find a way to take someone out of the picture. I really wasn't sure if removing Goddard was enough. I didn't know

if he was needed at all.” He spun. “I knew Zack couldn’t resist chasing Emma if there was the slightest chance she’d come to any harm.”

Ben rolled his eyes. “Such a sucker for the woman he loves.” He looked at Claire. “But how do you get a girl with unwavering faith in Christ to do something so drastic her Romeo will feel an overpowering need to rescue her?” He shook his head and looked at William. “And to abandon his friend in need?”

The sky grew darker, and the wind began to blow.

“Yeah, sure. Bethany’s methods worked, but they only went so far. None of us counted on Zack actually falling in love.” Ben shook his head. “Imagine that. A demon with scruples. *He* wouldn’t corrupt *her*.” Ben raised his finger. “That’s when I had the idea. Stop trying to corrupt her when what Zagan really wanted was you. Emma Green is hopelessly devoted to God and the Savior. Actually, Beth gave me the idea. She told me Emma’s only weakness was her love for everyone in this stupid town.”

Ben chuckled. “Pair that with Zack, and you’ve just lost your attendance at the ritual.” Ben shrugged his shoulders. “I had no idea Beth would go along with it. I have to admit, I didn’t see that one coming.” The clouds had begun a slow rotation. “And then, Sarah leaves?” Ben put his hand on William’s shoulder. “I hope there’s enough room in there for a dominant soul.”

“What do you get out of this?” William asked.

Ben leaned in. “That’s simple. I want what you have.”

William stared at him. “What do I have, Ben?”

“A woman. Someone I can have. Really have. Without worrying about being exposed. Like you and Sarah.”

“Ben, Zagan can’t promise that.”

Ben nodded his head. “He told me there’s a way. If I help him, I can have Anne.” Ben smiled. “She likes me, William.”

She told me. And I love her. Zagan said he could make it happen.”

William’s shoulders dropped, and he sighed heavily. “Oh, Ben. That’s not how it works. He’s promising you something he can’t deliver.”

“Oh.” Ben raised his eyebrows. “Who am I supposed to believe? You? You failed your commission. If it wasn’t for Goddard, you’d be a Screamer right now.” Ben pointed his thumb at his own chest. “Not me. I have it figured out. I’m gonna get everything I want with Anne along with the protection of the commander over all Whisperers.”

William shook his head. “Even if that were true, which it isn’t, what makes you think Anne wants you?”

“What are you talking about? She already told me she likes me.”

“She’s fourteen, Ben. She doesn’t know what she wants.”

“You’ll see.”

\* \* \*

Emma, Celeste, and Brooke fell in line with the rest of the crowd, hurrying down to the last event of the dedication ceremony. This would definitely be the talk of the town, though not for the reasons the hundreds around them thought.

“It’ll be good,” Celeste told Brooke. “We’re doing it together.”

Emma squeezed Brooke’s hand. “Look around. We’re doing it for everybody.”

Brooke struggled to hold her emotions, but it wasn’t working.

An older lady patted Brooke on the shoulder. “The song was lovely, Miss Persimmon.”

Brooke forced a smile and said, “Thank you, Mrs. Wheller.”

“Yeah, it was,” Celeste said. “Better than the radio.” Celeste stepped in front of Emma and Brooke and navigated

backward, keeping in step with the crowd. "Someday, girls are going to be singing it in churches everywhere." She spun around and took Brooke's other hand. "As soon as we figure out how to get you a record deal."

As the crowd streamed out the front door, some split off to take the smooth ramp while others opted for the quicker path of the stairs. The building was really amazing. All along the lake side were high walls of glass that made you feel like you were part of the landscape, but from the outside, it acted like a huge mirror. The lake reflected back and created an endless shoreline.

As Emma looked up at the large screen flanked by outdoor speakers, she almost felt better knowing that her lurid image with Heath Coal wasn't going to be its debut performance. Though it would have been a good show, it wasn't how she wanted to be remembered. She would have to settle for the live show she and her friends were about to improvise. That is, if Brooke could hold it together. Celeste would be fine, but with Brooke carrying his child, she was sure to be the star of the night.

"Look at that," Brooke said as she pointed toward the far side of the lake.

Emma noticed a few other people looking that direction. "Huh. It's supposed to be clear tonight." The cloud seemed to float above the lake, billowing into itself, as if it were forming from the inside. She shivered as a slight breeze chilled her arms, prompting her to draw her hands up and rub her shoulders.

"Are you cold?" Celeste asked.

"Aren't you?" Emma responded. Celeste shook her head. Emma looked at Brooke, but she shook her head as well. "Must just be me. Come on." She pointed to an area directly above the baptismal. "Let's go up there."

The baptismal was amazing. It took advantage of the natural landscape while affording all of the modern

conveniences. Emma remembered her Dad telling her about it way before any of the building plans were started. It used the actual water from the lake through a purifier that cycled the water through while heating it for the comfort of those that entered. It had handrails and a mechanical seat for those that had trouble getting into the water on their own.

There were a few additions her father hadn't been a part of, including additional lighting and built-in microphones so professions of faith from the baptismal could be heard by all. There were also underwater cameras so the baptisms could be recorded and split-screened with both under- and above-water views.

As Emma looked at the small procession of people in white robes off to the side of the stone pool, she hoped they would forgive her for interrupting their special time, but surely, they would want to know the type of man performing their most public profession of faith.

Emma glanced at the growing cloud that hovered over the lake then nudged Celeste and motioned toward it. "See that? It looks like it's glowing."

Celeste rolled her eyes. "It's a cloud, Emma. It's probably just the sun."

Two spotlights shone on a side double door exit of the building. The door swung open, and Pastor Coal stepped out to huge applause. He wore a long white robe that seemed to glow in the bright lights. As he descended the stairs, he waved like he was the president greeting a throng of admirers. He stepped down onto the platform, shaking hands and exchanging personal remarks with each of the baptismal candidates before turning to the crowd.

"Welcome all of Inspiration to the first baptisms of your new church home," Pastor Coal said. "I want to thank you all for joining us in this spectacular celebration." The crowd erupted, and he calmed them with his hand. "Although we celebrate this amazing achievement, remember that the next

three Sundays will still be in the old building. Now, don't any of you come out here this Sunday, or you'll be worshipping without us."

The crowd laughed, and he held his hands up again. "Now, who can think of a better way to celebrate our new place of worship than with welcoming of new members in the ordinance of baptism?" Once more the group cheered. He looked back at the candidates then turned toward the crowd. "Let's get this started," he said as he descended into the water. The giant screen displayed the church logo on one side while the other side presented views from both above and below the water.

In the balcony, Emma clutched both Celeste's and Brooke's hands. She looked between them and said, "Are you ready?" Celeste nodded, but Brooke pinched her lips tight. "Brooke?"

Brooke squeezed her eyes shut and nodded quickly. "Let's get it over with."

The three girls stood, and Emma shouted, "Pastor Coal! We have something we need to say tonight!"

Pastor Coal looked up along with the entire church body. "Why Emma Green. I'm sure these people would love to hear what you ladies have to say. Come see me directly after the ceremony, and we'll schedule a proper time." Pastor Coal smiled and turned back around to welcome the first candidate.

Celeste said, "The Daughters of Inspiration say the time is now."

"You know how jealous girls can be," Brooke added.

Pastor Coal turned and narrowed his eyes. "Another time girls."

Emma, Celeste, and Brooke looked at each other and descended the stairs toward the young pastor as he held his hands up.

*Inspiration*

Four knocks rang out over the speakers. Everyone's eyes turned toward the screen as Emma's face appeared, and she slowly walked toward the camera and disappeared from view.



55 *A Good Episode*

SARAH WINCED AND DOUBLED OVER, HER HAIR DIPPING into the lake water.

Zachary held her and forced his eyes to Bethany. “We need to get her to a hospital.”

“No!” Sarah cried. She held both hands to her side over the bullet wound, trying to push the pain deep inside. She flung an arc of water as she whipped her head up to watch the cloud glow an ominous, deep red above the spot William and their child were. “I’m here, William. We’re all here,” she whispered.

Bethany’s eyes pleaded with Zachary to do something, anything, as Sarah forced them farther in. She felt the cold dampness creep from her knees, to her thighs, to her waist as their clumsy steps splashed water onto her shoulders and face. She knew Zachary was right. But Sarah was right too. Her indecision was the deciding factor allowing Sarah to drag them.

Sarah screamed and tugged at her shirt, as she watched the trails of burgundy seep into the water. She cried out as she pulled at the fabric lodging its way beneath the skin. The fabric released another thick stream into the lake.

“Hold me up,” Sarah demanded. Bethany and Zachary nodded and held her arms. She screamed again and again as she pinched and squeezed around the wound with both hands, spilling more of her life. She ground her teeth as she worked the wound, causing Bethany to wince and nearly lose her grip.

Zachary turned his head, but couldn't force his eyes away as Sarah bucked and jumped in his arms. Sarah cupped her hands under the wound, and Zachary leaned his head closer. He looked at Bethany, and they both studied Sarah's side as her skin pushed and pulled as if an unseen hand poked and prodded the wound. They strained as Sarah struggled and whimpered, keeping her hands cupped beneath the wound. As the skin pushed and pulled, a small solid object fell into her hands and Sarah clutched her fists tight. With one final push of dark fluid, her wound sealed and the water cleaned her flesh, revealing an uneven pink scar.

Sarah relaxed, her chest heaving. She raised her head, and her eyes fluttered open. When she opened her palm, she carefully lifted the irregularly shaped slug and turned it in the evening light.

She looked at Zachary and Bethany and chuckled, “He said it stung a little.”

Bethany and Zachary exchanged a glance.

Sarah tucked the slug in her pocket and said, “Lying bastard.” Testing her strength, she placed her feet firmly on the lake floor. She slowly raised her head. “I'm okay. You can let go.”

Both slowly released Sarah, but still clutched her arm as she wavered. Sarah regained her balance and gave them a

nod. Once she was standing straight, her eyes focused on the display screen on the side of the church building.

Bethany and Zachary followed her gaze and saw the larger-than-life image of Emma walking toward the camera.

\* \* \*

“Is that you?” Brooke asked as she craned her neck.

Pastor Coal’s mouth dropped open. He looked at Emma. “What is this?”

Emma shook her head. “Not what it was supposed to be.”

Heath waved his arms and tried to talk over the audio from the video, “I apologize for the technical difficulties. We’ll have this corrected presently.”

In the control room, Eddie looked at Anne. “Are you sure she said to play this?”

Anne watched the screen with Emma stepping back into view before getting ushered out by the pastor. “She said he made a special message.”

They both jumped back as the video showed Pastor Coal throwing Samuel against the desk in clear view of the camera. “Let’s get something straight, Samuel,” Pastor Coal said. “I don’t care what he thinks he knows. I’m not the one stupid enough to include my name on the documents.”

On the stage, Emma crossed her arms and stood on the baptismal platform. Pastor Coal’s voice rang out, as he attempted to draw attention from the video.

In the control room, Anne looked at a small screen and said, “I think he’s telling you to stop it.”

Eddie looked at the preview monitor and saw the pastor waving his arms. He pressed a button and spoke quietly into a microphone, “Cut mikes ten and eleven.”

A quiet voice answered back, "Cutting baptismal audio." The only sound that remained came from the video playback.

"That's better," Eddie said. He grinned as he watched the video recording from the office of Pastor Heath Coal. "This looks like a good episode."

Anne flattened her hands in front of her face as if she were praying and watched the scene play out on the monitor.

On the screen, Samuel walked to Pastor Coal and said, "You're as much a part of this as I am."

"Sam," Heath said. "I'm not." Coal walked around his desk and sat in his oversized office chair. "None of this would've happened if you'd have let that failing paper die a proper death. Remember, it was your daughter's idea to cut pastoral health benefits to pay your vendor bills."

Sam's back was visible as he said, "You know damn well I intended to pay every penny back." He stabbed his finger at Heath. "You took it too far. We should've told them we couldn't do the treatments. And now, they know."

Heath waved his hand. "Just calm down. I can handle Norman Green." He motioned to the chair in front of his desk. Samuel hesitated then sat.

Pastor Coal emerged from the water as he shouted from the baptismal platform, "This is a joke, people. You can stop the video now."

He started to run toward the stairs under the large screen and was stopped cold by the local deputy staring with his hand on his holstered gun. The deputy pointed his free hand toward Pastor Coal. "You best stay put, Pastor."

Pastor Coal looked to the other side, but the Sheriff held the same pose. "Heath Coal, is there something you don't want us to see?"

Heath held both hands in front of him and backed toward the baptismal.

The scene played on.

Pastor Coal picked up a pen and spun it in his hands as he leaned back. “What evidence? Did they show you anything?” Heath tilted his head as if an unseen person was telling him a secret.

Samuel leaned his head down. “Well, no. But Norm said—”

Pastor Coal held the pen up. “See, there’s nothing to worry about.”

Samuel leaned forward and pounded on the desk. “You’re not listening, Heath. Don’t think for one second I’m going down for this alone. I’m sure the prosecutor would love to hear the real reason you had the church elders drop the charges.”

Heath nodded, then leaned forward and said, “I had the charges dropped for the good of Inspiration.”

“You had them dropped because you didn’t want an investigation.”

Pastor Coal slammed his fist on his desk. “And what would they’ve found, Sam.” He huffed and shook his head. “You and your daughter.” Samuel’s head jerked back. “That’s right, Sam. You were all too willing to lend your name for all of the documents.”

“But you signed the checks,” Samuel said.

Pastor Coal closed his eyes then smiled as if he were inspired. “I may have put the pen to the paper, but it was Norman Green’s name on the checks.” He shook his head and relaxed in his chair.

“People will know the truth,” Samuel said.

“People will know the truth I want them to know, Sam,” Pastor Coal said. “What would they believe? I’d say a man who’s desperately trying to hold on to an outdated family business embezzling church funds is a pretty good story.

With it being a true story and all, you and Norman Green will share the legacy of Inspiration's fall from greatness."

Samuel sat straight as a pencil. "I won't let you drag Norman's name through the mud anymore. You let him stand accused of your crimes long enough."

"Our crimes, Sam," Pastor Coal corrected.

"And I'm willing to accept the punishment," Samuel said. "Are you?"

"Tell you what, Sam. You and Liddy have been a little stressed lately." Pastor Coal opened his second drawer and paused.

"Heath?"

"What?" Pastor Coal looked up. "Yes." He reached into the drawer then dropped some keys on the desk in front of Samuel. He fiddled with something under the desk and retrieved a note pad then wrote something down and handed it to Samuel. "Here."

Samuel took it. "What's this?"

"That's a lakefront cottage I picked up recently." He scooted the note pad to Samuel. "Write a little note to your daughter and let her know where she can join you. Stay as long as you need. In the meantime, I'll find out just what Norm and Emma have. Trust me, Sam. I've always taken care of you."

Samuel picked up the pen, scribbled a note, and slid the pad back to Pastor Coal. "Don't tell her about this, Heath. Let me explain."

Pastor Coal stood and casually walked around his desk. "Of course, Sam. You've been under a lot of stress lately. I want you to relax. Don't worry about a thing."



56 *Tell Zack I Lied*

RAYMOND WHITE'S LEGS BURNED AS HE MADE HIS WAY UP the embankment. As he paused to look at the glowing red swirl of clouds overtaking the sky, his mind buzzed with images of his wife, the marriage, the honeymoon, and her clutching a bloodied stomach. The voices assaulted his head convicting him of his crimes. *Adultery, perjury, conspiracy, kidnapping, murder.* He didn't mean to. He just wanted to scare her, but he shot her. In front of witnesses. He stopped, his heart pounding, and he looked down to the church building, the parking lot, his car.

He gripped the gun and pounded the handle into his temple. "Stupid. Stupid. Stupid." He heard a noise and spun, shakily aiming the gun into the woods. "Who's there?" He relaxed and lowered the weapon. "You're just being paranoid."

He lowered his eyes to the ground and listened. The voices always told him what to do. He just had to be quiet. "Yes." He answered an unheard question then looked up. "I can do that." He steadied. It was all Sarah's fault. Her,

William Sable, and their bastard child Claire. The thought of their names drew the taste of sulfur. He spit and dragged his arm across his face. He wasn't guilty. They were.

Prison Warden Wesley Aero and Goddard Gainsboro struggled to stay in their seats as the van navigated the winding road.

"We had a deal!" Wesley shouted.

"You saw the way he looked, Warden. The boy was right. Sable was gonna stiff us," Redd replied as he turned the wheel. He leaned forward and looked at the red sky. "And I'm not going anywhere near the water with that storm rolling in."

Goddard struggled with his hands secured behind his back. The chains holding his ankles were barely long enough to shuffle his feet. "Come on, Wesley. You got your money. Get me to the water."

"Pete," Wesley said as he reached for the front passenger seat. "We've got nothing to lose. Let's bring him down."

Pete spun and shouted, "Sit down, Warden! Redd and I decide what we do now. We're not going back." He motioned his head toward Goddard. "We take him back to the pen now, just like the original plan."

"Not until we earn what we were paid for," Warden Aero argued.

Pete pulled his weapon and stuck it in the warden's face. "We've been paid. We're done."

Wesley's lips curled, and he reached for the gun. A flash filled the van, and the warden stumbled.

Redd looked back and shouted, "What the hell, Pete!"

Pete's eyes blinked rapidly as he swung toward Redd. Pete sat back in his seat, his gun shaking in his hands, as he held it up. He turned his head to the driver. "What do we do, Redd?"

Redd laughed. "This is perfect. Oh, yeah. This is just great." He looked at the two briefcases between the seats. He

thought of the one sitting in his apartment. Enough cash to start a new life.

He turned his head toward Pete. "Emily's gonna be hurt when she finds out about your plot to break Gainsboro out of prison." He shook his head. "And poor Bart. Growing up without his dad."

Pete's mouth went slack. "What are you talking about, Redd?"

Redd slipped his standard issue pistol from its holster. "Luckily, I was here to stop you," he said as he drove a slug into Pete's chest. He looked down to holster his weapon. When he looked up, something exploded through the windshield, and a man was standing in the middle of the road with his arm outstretched.

Redd's chest tightened with the shock of the impact, and he turned the wheel sharply to the right to avoid the stranger in the road.

Raymond White stood his ground as the van veered to his left. This was a good plan. Take the first vehicle and head out of town. When he got there, the voices would tell him what to do next. Sarah was dead. Sable could have Claire. What did he care? She wasn't his daughter anyways.

His new life could be great. Maybe the Caribbean? He'd always wanted to live on an island. He imagined himself sitting on a beach with a drink in his hand. A new life. One without the woman who ruined his old one.

Suddenly, his hip burst into flames before he was thrown off his feet by the van exploding. He landed hard along the side of the lake road, breathing short quick breaths as the van rolled end over end with all doors falling open.

The last thing Raymond saw was the van resting in the creek with four bodies scattered throughout the water. One in handcuffs and ankle chains.

\* \* \*

The sound of metal crashing pulled Emma's eyes from the large screen. She swung her head around and saw three people in the water. "Zack."

Celeste turned and said, "What are they doing?"

The three girls watched Sarah, Zachary, and Bethany as they stood with their eyes and arms raised toward the swirling red cloud. Each of them shouted something incomprehensible in succession.

Brooke drew her eyes together. "Are they okay?"

Emma looked at Brooke and Celeste. "Stay here. I need to tell Zack I lied." She motioned to Pastor Coal. "Watch him." Then, she jumped into the water.

Brooke and Celeste looked at each other then back at the Pastor. Heath Coal glanced between the deputy and the sheriff with his knees bent and his arms out, like he was going to steal a base in the town softball league. The wind kicked up, and his baptismal gown caught and nearly threw him off the platform.

Emma was chest deep in the water, struggling to make her way. She desperately had to get to Zachary, but the wind blew her hair into her eyes, blinding her. As she struggled to clear her face and push forward, she shouted, "Zack!"

Pastor Coal looked at the screen, knowing what the entire congregation and town of Inspiration was about to witness.

As the video continued playing, Samuel gained a righteous indignation as he stood and shook his head. "I'm sorry Heath. I can't live with myself anymore. It's time I cleared Pastor Green's name. He's a good man." He turned and walked toward the door with his face clearly visible. "I'm gonna talk to the sheriff right now. It's the right thing to do."

Heath walked around his desk, reached into a drawer, and lifted Pete—the hunting knife Emma had stashed earlier. "I can't let you do that, Sam." Pastor Coal threatened.

“What about Liddy? This will only hurt Inspiration.” He walked toward the camera, holding the knife at his side.

Samuel was out of the camera’s view as his voice rang out. “No! What we’ve been doing is hurting this town. It’s time someone finally did the right thing.”

Pastor Coal’s face grew larger as he stepped closer to the camera. His face contorted and jerked. When he backed away and lowered his hand, the knife was covered in thick, red blood. Pastor Coal shook his head slowly. “Sorry Sam. You made me do it.” Calmly, he returned to his desk and set the blade down.

Pastor Coal raised his bloodied hand and said, “Oh, Sam. Why’d you go and mess me up before the dedication was finished?” He sighed and looked down. “I tell you what, Sam. We’ll talk later. I have to get cleaned up now.”

The sheriff drew his gun as the wind whipped his uniform. “On your knees, Heath Coal!”

Pastor Coal looked at the deputy who held the same pose. “Down! Now!” the deputy shouted as he struggled to hold his stance.

Coal looked between the crying faces of the congregation and the stern faces of the local law enforcement. He leaned against the wind and looked toward the baptismal. Emma Green was to blame. From the moment the playback started, he knew Emma had planned everything. She started the recording to catch him in the act. She planned to exploit his weakness by throwing herself at him. That’s what all girls did, wasn’t it? It didn’t matter how old or young they were. All they ever did was seduce him. He was a good man. The Daughters of Inspiration were to blame for everything. Not him.

He stood with his legs wide as his gown flew like a flag against a storm and glared at the wicked ones laid out on the baptismal platform. He scanned the few in the gowns and

dismissed them. He recognized the familiar forms of Brooke and Celeste, the wicked Daughters of Inspiration, watching him, but where was Emma Green? The worst of them.

He would deal with all of them, but for now, Emma Green had to pay for what she'd done. "Emma Louise Green!" he called out as he took a step forward.

"Stay where you are," the sheriff yelled into the wind.

As Pastor Coal looked at the faces of the harlots on the platform, he took another step forward. "Emma!" he shouted. He focused on Brooke's face as she turned and looked into the lake. The red cloud swirled and flashed above as Heath Coal followed Brooke's gaze. Then, he saw Emma struggling against the waves.

"On your knees!" the deputy shouted.

Pastor Coal glanced at the deputy over his shoulder then broke into a sprint along the platform directly toward the baptismal.

"Damn it," the sheriff said, lowering his weapon. "I don't have a clean shot!"

Brooke and Celeste screamed as Coal charged them. He veered right and dove into the raging water. He swam hard against the waves, attempting to close the gap between himself and Emma.

"Zack!" Emma screamed.

Zachary heard his name and opened his eyes.

"Zack!" Emma screamed again.

Zachary turned his head and saw Emma struggling in the water. He waved his arms and shouted, "Emma! Get out of the water! Get out of the water!" Heath Coal grabbed her and forced her under. "No!" he screamed and dove toward her. The transfer was about to happen. He'd already given consent. Any second, a soul would ascend through the water into a body. He needed to make sure it wasn't hers.

Zachary's muscles ached as he pulled himself through the water. He reached for Coal, but only brushed his sleeve. Coal's eyes burned into Zachary's as he held Emma under. Zachary pushed hard and grabbed Coal's hair, pulling desperately. Coal cried out as Zachary used his grip to launch himself forward.

Emma's chest burned as she struggled to escape. She saw rapid motions against the glowing red surface above. As the colors faded, she knew she was dying.

Finally, she gave up. Her mind flashed back to when she sat in church as a child. She smiled as she played with the flower on her yellow dress. Her feet didn't reach the floor, so she had a tendency to swing them when she sat in the pews. She didn't really like the patent leather shoes her mom made her wear on church days, but she'd snuck some tennis shoes in the little purse her mom let her bring. As soon as service was over, no more hard leather shoes.

Her mother told her to stop fidgeting and pay attention. "This is an important day for your father," her mother whispered. "They're voting on him after this."

"Are we gonna move here, Mommy?" She looked around the small church and saw two girls peeking at her from a couple rows up. The one with blonde hair would pop up then flash a smile and a tiny wave, followed by a brown-haired one repeating the action. Emma smiled at them.

"If they vote yes," Emma's mom whispered.

Emma looked up. "I hope they vote yes. I like it here."

Her mom smiled. "Me too."

Emma traced the word on the top of the half sheet of paper and whispered, "Inspiration." She looked two rows up at the girls who were both on their knees with only their eyes visible. Emma giggled quietly as a lady scolded them and made them turn around. She felt the warmth of the town and knew she would love living in Inspiration.



57 *Transference*

BEN CLOSED HIS EYES AND FACED THE RAGING SKY. “MUTATIS animis adsentior.” He opened his eyes and looked at William and Claire. “You ready for this?”

Claire clung to her father. “I’m scared, Daddy. I don’t wanna.”

William set her in the water and said, “I’m right her with you, Claire Bear.” He brushed the hair out of her face. “Do you hear the voice?”

Claire looked up then back at William. She nodded her head.

“Just say the words Mommy taught you,” William said. “Can you do that for me?”

“Ben said you’ll go away,” she cried.

“I’m not going anywhere, Sweetie. Do you hear me?”

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

Claire looked at Ben then back at William before turning her face to the sky and shivering.

“How about we say it together?” William asked. Claire nodded, and William clutched her hands. “Close your eyes and say what I say.” Claire squeezed her eyes shut and together they slowly said, “*Mutatis animis adsentior.*”

The sky flashed and exploded in a bright burst as a hundred bolts of lightning converged in the middle of the cloud and descended into the center of the lake. The air filled with screams as people crawled over each other to head to higher ground.

From the middle of the water, streams of light snaked across the surface in all directions, heading for the shore, the waterways, and anything else within and around the lake. Each body in the water was instantly paralyzed, and the area was filled with shrieks.

Claire stiffened and shook. Ben wretched and flailed. William stood straight.

Brooke and Celeste gripped each other as they watched streams of light envelop the lake and shoot to the sky around Zachary and Emma. “No! Emma!” Brooke cried out as she scrambled toward the edge. Celeste strained to keep her friend from diving into the dangerous waters.

As the lights retreated from the water, the electrical streams reversed course and snaked toward the middle of the lake. When all converged, the string of lightning receded into the red, swirling cloud. The sky emitted a low rumble, and the cloud reversed rotation then dissipated, leaving behind a calm, clear evening sky.

Claire woke up with a scream. As she opened her eyes, Ben regained consciousness and gasped for air. Claire dove into the water and wrapped her arms around her father and cried, “Daddy! Daddy! Wake up!”

Ben walked out of the water and sat on the lakeshore watching Claire. He knew when William woke, he wasn't

going to be the man the little girl was crying for. Still, she cried and held his head above the water.

Celeste let go of Brooke, allowing her to dive into the calm lake and make her way to her friend. Celeste didn't want to see. She sat on the platform, wrapped her arms around her knees, and cried.

Sarah and Bethany slowly walked toward the three floating bodies twenty feet away. "No," Bethany repeated as she took each step. She moved faster. "What were they doing in the water?" She turned to Sarah. "What happens if..."

Sarah stuttered, "I-I don't know."

When Brooke reached Emma, she cradled her head and cried. Suddenly, Emma twitched. She looked at Zachary, but he started twitching as well. Soon, Emma started heaving and thrashing so hard that Brooke was knocked aside. "No, no, no," she said as she scrambled to keep her friend above the water.

Pastor Coal's eyes flew open, and he reached out before sinking. Brooke screamed and lost her footing as all three of them spasmed and sank. Sarah and Bethany backed away. Bethany grabbed Brooke and held her.

Emma sprang from the water and gasped. She gained her footing then screamed. She sucked in a long breath and screamed again. Brooke rushed to her, and they held each other.

"Thank God," Brooke cried as she pulled Emma into a hug.

Emma pulled away and spun. "Zack!" She looked around for him desperately.

After a few seconds she spotted him floating away, underwater and unconscious.

"Zack!"



58 *Birth*

HIS CHEST BURNED AS HE OPENED HIS EYES. LIGHT AND colors streamed in, but nothing looked right. Shadows and a brilliant red danced and swayed. With an excruciating flash, his face burned and something pulled hard. When he emerged from the water, the cold air stung. Still, his chest burned. Another tug, then another as he arched his back and prayed for relief.

He looked up and saw a figure dragging him. A beautiful creature. Definitely female. With one last tug, he fell on his back and moved his jaw, trying to remember something. What was it? As he watched the light glint off her hair, she raised both hands high above her head. He marveled at the girl's perfection. Just as he'd remembered. He begged her with his eyes to tell him what to do.

"You're not getting rid of me that easy," the girl said as her clenched hands came down hard on his chest. "Breathe!"

The shock of her assault forced him to exhale violently. He sucked in a deep breath and remembered. He was

breathing. That's what he'd forgotten. He raised his hand, and she looked at him with her chest heaving as much as his. He lay on the ground and looked at the girl straddling him. Studying her eyes, he sucked in another deep breath. "You're more beautiful than I remember."

\* \* \*

William's breaths slowed as he awoke in the water and looked at Claire. When he reached his hand out, she hesitantly took it. He picked her up and carried her to shore. Ben rose, tilted his head, and took a step forward, looking into William's eyes. William walked past him and opened the Escalade door. He put Claire down, and she hopped into the booster seat. He reached in, buckled her seat belt, and kissed her cheek. "Let's go find Mommy, okay?" Claire nodded and squeezed his neck.

William stood tall and faced Ben. "You coming or what?"

Ben had forgotten how to breathe for a moment. "Yes." He quickly nodded and ran around the SUV.

\* \* \*

He was still laying on the ground as his head began to clear. He noticed others around the beautiful creature. A female helped her off of him and pulled her away. Two males helped him up.

With a deep voice, one said, "I thought for sure the lightning killed you."

The other held his arm and added, "You're one lucky bastard."

Zagan stood and looked at his new hands. They were young and smooth. Perfect. It worked. He felt the soul inside of him struggle for control, but he pushed it away. This was his body now, yet still, he felt the presence crying out. Desperate.

He scanned the faces. It seemed like centuries since he could see the real faces of humans. Even with the darkening sky, the colors were vivid. The breeze was cold against soft

skin. This was it. The perfection of existence the God of the Universe had created so long ago. Now it belonged to him, along with everything else that went with those created in the image of God.

The two males must've felt the need to assist him, but he'd become quite alert. He turned to one and said, "I am doing well now. I no longer require your assistance."

"Assistance?" one of them asked as he wrinkled his forehead.

The beautiful creature walked up to him and studied his face. His heart pounded in his chest. A strange sensation. What was it about this girl that affected him? His breath grew quick as the warmth of her exhale grazed his neck. Her breast was so close to his chest that the damp cloth over his skin heated. He longed to feel her warm lips against his.

"Are you sure you're okay?" she whispered.

A smile crept over his face. "I am quite well. I assure you."

"Good," she said as took a step back.

He watched her eyes narrow then his jaw flashed with a burst of pain. The girl stepped away shaking her hand. He shook his head and wrinkled his face. Without the males helping him, he may have stumbled. He steadied himself and looked at her.

"Sorry about that," the girl said to the two men.

"About what?" one of them asked.

The other said, "I don't know what you're talking about. I didn't see anything."

Zagan's attention focused on a black vehicle that stopped behind the girl. He winced as his jaw throbbed. He tilted his head as William—*William?*—carried Claire up to Sarah and the three of them hugged.

The beautiful creature looked to the men helping him and said, "You can take him now."

The men pulled his arms behind his back and cinched something hard on his wrists.

“What are you doing? I am Zagan, legion commander of the Talkers.”

“Are you now?”

William furrowed his brow and looked at him. Sarah’s hand flew to her mouth.

A young man walked up to him and whispered, “Here we go by our human names. Yours is Coal.”

One of the men squeezed his arm hard and pushed him toward the road. “Heath Coal, you have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you. Do you understand the rights I have just read to you?”

Zagan drew his eyes together and asked, “Understand?”

The man repeated, “Do you understand the rights I have just read to you?”

Zagan looked down and nodded his head, not sure what he was agreeing to.

“Good,” the man said as they walked away. “With these rights in mind, do you wish to speak to me?”

Zachary walked up to Emma and put his arm around her.

Brooke looked at Emma and asked, “After everything he’s done, why did you save him?”

Emma frowned and glanced at Zachary. She looked at Brooke and opened her mouth then closed it again before shaking her head. “Well, no matter what he’s done, he’s still a person.” She shrugged. “It’s just what you do.”

Brooke huffed. “Well, I wouldn’t have.”

Zachary put his hands on both of Emma’s shoulders. “Why were you in the water? I was trying to tell you to—”

Emma’s lips met his. He pulled her closer and closed his eyes.

When she broke the kiss, she said, “I needed to tell you something.”

He waited. “Well, tell me.”

“I love you, Zachary Sable. I’m sorry I lied.”

She pulled away at the sound of screams from the church.

“Sam,” Brooke said before breaking into a run.

Emma looked at Zack, and he sensed the urgency. They both sprinted toward the commotion. The parking lot was jammed, and emergency vehicles were pulling up along the access road.

Emma pushed past the people blocking the entrance while Zack did his best to keep up with her. She saw Anne Carmine standing outside Coal’s office door with keys hanging from the lock. Anne was wringing her hands and whimpering. Brooke beat Emma there. She was on her knees with her hand over her mouth next to Celeste.

When Emma reached the opening and looked inside, she fell to her knees. “Oh, my God. Sam.”

Inside, Eddie was covered in blood. As he applied pressure to Sam’s abdomen, he talked softly to Sam.

“Excuse us. Let us through,” an EMT said, as they made their way to the scene. The first EMT saw Eddie and said, “You stay right there.”

Eddie nodded and leaned down, “They’re here now, Sam. You hear me?”

Sam swallowed and nodded slightly.

A second EMT said, “I’m going to slip past and set this beside you. Stay put as we lift him. Got that?”

Eddie nodded again.

“What’s your name?”

“E-Eddie,” he stuttered.

“You’re doing a good job, Eddie. He’s lost a lot of blood, but you may have saved his life.” The man leaned down to Sam and said, “How you doing, Sam? Listen. We’re gonna

take good care of you. Liddy's outside. She's gonna come with us, okay?"

Sam nodded and tried to lift his head. The EMT told him to lay down, but he kept trying to talk. The EMT looked back. "He wants to talk to Emma. Is there an Emma here?"

Emma lifted her head. "I'm here." She scrambled to his side and kneeled down. "I'm here, Sam."

He reached out, and Emma took his hand and squeezed. "I need to tell you I'm sorry, Emma." He took a slow, shallow breath. "I've done a terrible thing. I deserve this."

"No, Sam."

"Emma." Sam nodded his head. "I do. I've been terrible to you and your father. I wish I could take it all back. Please don't blame Liddy. It was my fault. She wanted to tell the truth, but I was ashamed."

"It's okay, Sam. I forgive you. You know I love you."

Sam held a pained smile. "Of course you do. I'm irresistible."

The EMT put his hand on Emma's arm. "We have to go."

Emma squeezed Sam's hand and backed up. Zachary held her as they wheeled Samuel Wheat away.



59 *The Green Meeting*

EMMA SHIVERED, AND ZACHARY RUBBED HER ARMS. “YOU’RE freezing.”

“I have some clothes in the ladies’ room.” Zachary opened his mouth to question, but she cut him off. “I got ready here. What about you? We need to get you home.”

“I have a duffel with clothes in Sarah’s car,” he said. This time Emma opened her mouth in an unspoken question. “You met her.” Emma narrowed her eyes, and he added, “Kind of. She was the woman with Bethany and me in the water.”

Emma stared.

“She’s William’s girlfriend.”

“Oh.” Emma looked down and shook her head. “I’m still not clear on that. Why were you in the water?”

Zachary opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He wasn’t sure what he could say. I’m actually a demon, and we had to give consent for Zagan, the legion commander of all embodied humans, to transfer his soul into another body

through the water, which actually went really wrong, and he ended up possessing Pastor Coal? That probably wouldn't go over too well.

Thankfully, Celeste saved him. "Oh, my God, Emma." Celeste and Brooke turned Emma around and formed a group hug. "I thought you were dead. I was so scared when the lightning hit and everything exploded."

"I was hit by lightning?" Emma turned her head and saw Zachary shrug through the corner of her eye.

Zachary stepped back, relieved he didn't have to answer Emma's question for the time being. His mouth dried, and his chest tightened. What was he going to do? He loved Emma. He loved her enough to betray everything, but he was what he was. Christ's redemption could never apply to him. After everything, he knew this wouldn't end well. He couldn't leave, but could he stay? He needed to talk to William.

"Yeah," Brooke said. "What did it feel like? Do you remember anything?"

Emma looked down. Did she remember? Her mind flashed, and she saw Heath's face then her hair floating by her eyes with a halo of red light. She looked up. "I do remember something."

"What?" Celeste asked.

"My mom. We were sitting in the church that first Sunday." She looked at each of them. "Both of you were there."

"I remember that," Celeste said. "My mom said if we didn't turn around and sit like ladies, Brooke couldn't come home with us."

"Didn't we all go to the ice-cream shop?" Brooke asked.

A warm smile filled Emma. "We did. That was the day we met."

"Why don't we do that kind of stuff anymore?" Celeste asked. "Just hang out?"

“Let’s do it. Tomorrow. Okay?” Emma asked. Celeste and Brooke smiled, and Emma saw little Anne Carmine standing against the wall, studying her feet. She looked at her friends and said, “Guys. This is Anne Carmine.” She turned, and Anne looked up. “She’s totally awesome, and I have a feeling she’s gonna be really important some day.”

Brooke and Celeste both said, “Hi, Anne,” in unison.

Emma held her arm out. “What do you say, Anne? You wanna hang out with us?”

Anne walked over and said, “Sure,” as they included her in another hug. She pulled away slightly and looked at Brooke and Emma. “Why are you guys so wet?”

“Oh yeah,” Emma replied. “Make sure they get your number, Anne. I have to go change.” Emma looked at Celeste. “Sorry about ruining your dress.”

“It’s cool,” Celeste said. “Thanks for not dying.”

\* \* \*

Emma stepped out of the ladies room in her jeans and t-shirt carrying a garment bag. “That’s better.” As she handed it to Zachary, she said, “Your turn.”

“I’m fine,” Zachary replied.

“What’s going on out there?” Emma asked.

“Not sure. They just started gathering.”

Emma made her way to the crowded foyer. Her father was trying to push his way through yelling, “Emma? Have you seen my daughter?”

“Daddy,” Emma called as she pushed into the throng. Finally, she broke through and embraced her father.

“I was so worried, Emma,” her father said as he held her. He pulled away. “Are you okay?”

“I am now.”

“With the police and the fire department, I thought something terrible had happened. The road was blocked with ambulances. I had to leave my car a half-a-mile away. There was a terrible accident.”

Zachary saw Sarah and William step into the church. William looked at Zachary and waved him over. As he watched Emma and her father talking, he slowly backed away.

When he was close enough, William leaned in and said, "Goddard's dead."

"What?" Zachary asked.

"All of them. Not just him."

"The Warden?"

William nodded. "Apparently, Goddard never made it to the lake."

"What does this mean?" Zachary asked. "Is he Solutos?"

William shook his head. "I don't know."

"We need to know if you're protected," Zachary said, looking between Sarah and William. "If any of us are." Zachary pointed to Sarah. "She's got a crazy ex-husband."

Sarah said, "Somehow the van hit Ray before going off the road."

"Mr. White?" Zachary asked. "Is he dead?"

William said, "I don't think so. His head wasn't covered when they put him in the ambulance."

"Where's Claire?" Zachary asked.

"She's in the car with Ben and Bethany," Sarah said.

"That's another thing we have to talk about," William said. "Ben was working with Zagan."

Zachary's mouth flew open. "What?" His face grew hard, and his fists tightened. "I'll kill him."

William put his hand on Zachary's chest. "Not so fast."

Zachary started to push past him, but William held him back. "Leave him alone for now, Zack." William shook his head and whispered, "I don't know how it happened, but Zagan is taken care of for now. Ben is scared. I think we can still work with him."

Suddenly, Emma wrapped her arms around Zachary's arm and said, "You'll never believe what's happening."

Zachary backed away from William and said, "You look happy. What's going on?"

Emma motioned toward the group of people surrounding her father. All of them were on their knees in concentric circles with him in the center. "They're all praying for forgiveness, and they've asked him to take the church back." She bit her lip. "I'm gonna drive him home. Will you be okay?"

Zachary smiled. "Of course, Emma. I'm so happy for you." Zachary scanned the room. There wasn't a single demon in the entire area. Something had really happened here.

Emma smiled and kissed him. "Okay. I'll see you tomorrow then. I love you."

Zachary glanced at William and said, "I love you, too," to Emma.

Emma snuck one more kiss before joining her father.

"We need to get home," William said. "Can you and Beth meet us there?" Zachary nodded; then, William turned to Sarah. "I'll take Ben in your car. We need to talk. Alone."

Sarah nodded.



60 *A Promise*

ZACHARY OPENED HIS EYES, LOOKED AT THE BRIGHTNESS flowing through the bedroom window, and smiled. The warmth felt good. He arched his back, stretching his arms wide. Something was different today. He couldn't put his finger on it. Maybe it was that he wasn't vanquished when William's plan went sideways, or that Coal and Zagan got what was coming to them. He pictured Emma hugging her father. She was safe. He had no idea what that meant for him, but he didn't want to waste any more of the time he had left. She was his world now, and he was going to tell her.

After a warm shower he slipped on some clean jeans, pulled a t-shirt over his wet hair, and picked up the clothes still damp from the lake water. He fished out the ring and held it in his palm for several seconds before dropping it into his pocket.

When he stepped into the hall with the pile of wet clothes, Ben opened his door and stalled. Zachary narrowed

his eyes as Ben studied the floor and skirted by. William said they could still work with him, but could he be trusted?

Zachary dropped the clothes in the hamper and Bethany stepped into the hallway. She stretched and yawned. "I don't think I've ever slept so good." She tilted her head. "I just slept."

"Okay."

"No. I mean, I slept."

"Me too."

She rolled her head back. "No one pulled me away. I just stayed here and slept. It was amazing. What about you?"

He was rested. That's what felt different. "Stayed here all night."

William and Sarah had breakfast nearly prepared when Claire ran into the kitchen. "Mommy! Daddy!" Sarah picked her up with a spin, and William wrapped his arms around them, nuzzling his day old scruff into the back of his daughter's neck, while Claire giggled.

Bethany raised her eyebrows. "Daddy?" She looked at Zachary who had frozen mid-bite.

Ben cocked his head. "Oh, yeah. You guys missed that part." He went back to eating while he flipped his finger toward the trio playing in the kitchen. "William is Claire's father."

Bethany nodded then watched them. "I guess that makes sense."

Someone knocked on the door. Everyone stopped and looked at each other to see who invited an outsider. Claire rolled her eyes and squirmed out of Sarah's arms. As she ran to the door, she said, "I still don't get why everyone freaks out when someone's at the door." She opened it just enough to peek out. "Hi, Emma. Guess what?"

Emma knelt on the front porch. "What?"

"My mom's not a secret anymore. Do you wanna meet her?"

“Of course, I do.”

“Well, don’t stay on the porch then,” Claire said as she reached for Emma’s hand. “Come in.”

Zachary stood and slid his arm around Emma as he watched Claire officially introduce them.

“Did you see the news?” Emma asked. She walked to the counter, picked up a remote, and pointed it at a small flat screen on the wall. “News teams are all over town.”

When the screen came on, the reporter’s words started mid-sentence. The banner along the bottom read, “Strange occurrences in the small town of Inspiration.” The reporter stopped and held her ear, “I’m told we have a live feed from Inspiration. Rick? Can you hear us?”

“I hear you, Jane. I’m standing at the entrance to Lake Inspiration where a bizarre series of events took place last night that sounds more like a Lemony Snicket book than reality. Truly, a series of unfortunate events,” Rick the reporter said. “Behind me, you can see workers recovering a van used in a failed prison break. Apparently, an armed pedestrian took aim and shot through the windshield, hitting the driver, and forcing the three guards down the embankment. The pedestrian was struck and thrown to the side of the road.

“The identity of the pedestrian and four dead occupants of the van have not been released,” he said as he walked to the side. “This all took place during an unusual weather occurrence. Witnesses describe a swirling red cloud that caused a violent lightning strike to the center of the lake. Some witnesses claim to have seen people in the water at the time of the strike, but nothing has been confirmed.

“If that’s not enough, at the same time, the new Inspiration Community Church was celebrating a building dedication ceremony when a video was leaked onto the giant outdoor screen allegedly documenting an attempted murder committed inside that very evening. We’ll be on-site to bring you all of the—”

Emma turned the television off and asked, “Crazy, right? All of the networks are here trying to interview everyone they see. If you don’t want to be on TV, stay away from the square.”

Zachary tapped his finger on his pocket. “Emma, can we talk?”

Emma tucked her hair behind her ear. “That doesn’t sound good.”

He took her hand, and she looked at Bethany as he led her out the front door. Zachary closed the door and sighed. Emma’s leg twitched as she waited for Zachary to give her whatever bad news he was holding in.

Zachary slid his hands in his pockets and said, “I’ve been holding on to something for a while now, and...” Emma searched his eyes as he hesitated. “It’s actually the first thing I remember. I was never supposed to...”

Emma’s lip trembled. She ran both hands up her neck and pushed her hair behind her ears. Her leg was flexing and twitching.

Zachary’s throat dried. He wasn’t sure what it was about this girl that affected him so much. Did she know she did this to him? He swallowed and continued, “It’s kind of a house rule. We’re not supposed to keep—”

Emma sucked in a breath and blurted out, “Are you breaking up with me?”

“What?” Zachary drew his brows together. “No.” He pulled his hand out of his pocket. “I’m told it’s called a promise ring.”

Emma’s breath hitched. She watched as his hand opened, revealing a gold band.

“It’s the only thing that’s actually mine.” Zachary shook his head. “I’m probably screwing this up, but I want you to have it. I love you, Emma Louise Green.” He shook his head. “I was convinced I didn’t have the capability to love and wasn’t worthy of being loved.”

*Inspiration*

She delicately picked it up and looked into his eyes.

He tucked the lock of hair over her ear and traced her slender neck. “If you’ll take this ring, I promise to show you everyday how important you are to me. You’ll never know how much you’ve changed my world. You taught me I can love again.”



## 61 *Sparks*

SPARKS WAS MORE LIKE A LANDMARK THAN A CAFÉ. WITH A menu pretty much consisting of ice cream and old-fashioned soda, it was like someplace time forgot. That's basically what Emma told Zachary as they headed toward the square. She warned him there would be a line, but with all of the attention the town was getting, the place was packed. Lucky for them, Celeste and Brooke had already staked out one of the few booths the historic landmark held.

Emma slid into the booth, and Celeste asked, "Is that what I think it is?"

"Oooh! Let me see," Brooke said as she pulled Emma's hand toward her.

"Zack gave it to me."

Celeste winked at Zachary. "Classy move."

Brooke's phone buzzed and she looked down, typed a quick message, and looked at Zachary's glass. "Don't ya' just love their floats?"

Emma asked, "Can you believe he's never had one before?"

Celeste arched an eyebrow. "A float?"

Zachary shrugged and took a sip. He smiled and dipped the long spoon into the frothy top and slipped it into his mouth and closed his eyes humming. Emma nudged her thigh against his and said, "I told you, right?"

"It's amazing."

Celeste put her hands on the table on either side of her banana split and asked, "You've never had a root-beer float before?" When he shook his head, she sat back. "You're a real world traveler, aren't you?"

Emma smiled and said, "Zack hasn't really done—"

"I've been around the world," Zachary told Celeste.

"Wait," Emma said. "You've been around the world?"

"Several times."

Celeste eyed him. "And you've never had a float?"

Brooke winked at him and smiled. "Makes sense to me. They're more of an American thing."

Emma looked at Brooke. "You're in a good mood today."

Brooke lowered her head and leaned toward Emma. "Remember that thing we talked about yesterday?" Emma nodded slightly, and Brooke said, "Turns out it's nothing."

Celeste raised a spoon of ice-cream. "All hail the monthly visitor. Even if he's a little late sometimes."

Zachary pulled his eyebrows together, and Emma said, "It's good news. Don't worry about it."

Brooke looked past Zachary, waved her hand, and said, "We're over here."

Zachary turned to see Anne Carmine dragging Ben through the crowd like a happy dog on a leash.

Brooke said, "Squish in," as she scooted toward Celeste, and Anne sat down.

Ben looked down and nudged his chin like he expected Zachary to scoot over. Zachary lowered his eyes and took

another spoonful of frothy ice-cream. Ben scowled and went to force his way in, but Anne said, "Can you get me a sugar cone with a single scoop of guilt-free vanilla? And a soda with chocolate syrup?" Ben stood for two beats until she smiled and said, "Please." He looked at the crowd, then shrugged and went to find the back of the line.

Anne's eyes flashed, and she said, "We're gonna be on TV." She pointed out the window. "That guy just interviewed us about last night. Cool, right? Oh, yeah. He said that old guy that the pastor stabbed is gonna be okay, too. That Eddie guy's a hero."

"Sam's okay?" Emma asked.

Anne frowned. "Sorry. I didn't know you knew him."

Celeste dropped her spoon and stared at the door. "Is that your cousin with Blake Gray?"

Zachary turned and saw Blake holding Bethany's hand. Blake's eyes brightened when he saw Zachary, and they made their way toward them through the mass of bodies.

Brooke tilted her head. "Hi, Blake. Beth."

Bethany responded with a tight smile. Zachary arched an eyebrow, and she told him to shut up with her eyes. He smiled and put his arm around Emma. Who was he to talk? Besides, she can certainly take care of herself.

Blake dropped her hand, took a step back, and raised his arms. "Anything you want. Just tell me, and it's yours."

Zachary watched Bethany's face take on an unfamiliar form. She smiled. Not the fake, whatever, or I told you so kind. This one was so foreign he wasn't sure she was the same girl. Her eyes creased, and her cheeks flushed. For the first time, Zachary saw joy flowing from the girl who birthed him into this world. She was actually happy, and it looked good on her.

Bethany said, "Anything chocolate."

Blake tipped his hat. "I like a girl who knows what she wants."

Celeste quipped, “Don’t you like any girl, Blake?”

A generous smile grew on his face, and he faked a gunshot at Celeste. “Not any more. There’s only one girl I like.” He turned on his boot heel and darted through the crowd.

Bethany sat in the space Zachary refused to make for Ben and Celeste asked, “Blake Gray? Seriously?”

Emma looked around Zachary. “He’s actually a really good guy. I think it’s great.”

“Me, too,” Brooke said, nudging Celeste.

Celeste shrugged. “Okay. I’ll be nice.”

Emma squeezed Zachary’s hand and Bethany’s eyes focused on the gold band. “That’s new,” she said, nudging Zachary. He responded with a look that said, say anything and you’re dead, so she closed her mouth.

Celeste said, “Mr. World Traveler gave it to her. Nice, huh?”

Bethany nodded and eyed her house-mate. “So, you’ve told them all about your travels?”

Zachary narrowed his eyes. “Not all of them.” He smiled and drew a long sip from the tall straw. “Can’t use up all of my stories in one sitting. They’ll get bored.”

“Well, I won’t,” Emma said.

When Ben and Blake came back to the table, Emma suggested her and Zachary give up their seats. Zachary quickly drained the old-fashioned glass and agreed with Emma. He didn’t really want to sit with Ben, and he loved the idea of having Emma all to himself.

Emma spent the day showing Zachary her favorite trails and landmarks. When she took him home, it was dark. Claire was already in bed, so they quietly walked to his door.

“I should probably go,” Emma whispered.

“Can you stay with me for a little while?”

“You sure? Last time...”

He led her in, quietly closed the door, and sat on the bed with her in front of him. “I don’t expect you to understand, but I have to take things slow. I can’t just—”

She sat down and kissed him. “I understand. I’m sorry I tried to go too fast. It means a lot to me, too.” She kissed him and pushed him down, settling into the crook of his arm and looked in his eyes. “I’ll just stay until you fall asleep.”

She kissed him several times and closed her eyes. He watched as her face went slack and she breathed deeply. He tucked her hair behind her ear and let her sleep. He felt a tingle down his forearm and gently nudged his shoulder. As she stirred, he froze. She calmed, and he rested his hand on her shoulder and traced his thumb over her skin. With a soft moan, she relaxed again, and he decided to let her be.

His arm throbbed as he settled in for the night, making a memory of the girl who had, not only changed his world, but allowed him to become hers.



*Epilogue*

THE STENCH OF SULFUR STUNG HIS NOSE AS TIAMANICUS was drawn by the thoughts of a powerful presence.

“Good of you to finally join us,” a large demon said as he motioned for him to take his seat among several others.

Tiamanicus sat. He knew Thamuz from their previous encounters, but the others were new to him. “I had trouble sleeping, master.” The dark realm had become an unfamiliar, bitter place. The language came as a distant memory as it is incomprehensible to the human ear.

“I trust you are familiar with one another,” the large one said.

Each of them looked around with confusion.

“Why, of course you aren’t,” he said. “I assure you, you do know one another.” He motioned around the room and stated their human names in turn. William, Sarah, Ben, Bethany, and Zachary looked upon their true forms. “I am

Rahab. For clarity, I suggest we use our human names. Do you agree?"

They all nodded.

"Goddard," William said. "Are you—?"

"Solutos?" Goddard nodded. "In spite of our... inconveniences, our ultimate objectives were achieved. I have ascended to the unbound, and Zagan is nowhere to be found. I have summoned you here to tell you some truths I have learned since joining the Solutos. This can only be shared if all members can be trusted. Are there any among you who cannot meet this criterion?"

All eyes turned toward the one known as Ben. Ben exchanged a glance with William. "I can be trusted. I assure you."

Goddard looked to William, who nodded, so Goddard continued. "Very well." His yellow eyes gazed upon them. "There are ten others who know of this truth. If any are known to speak the truth outside of the Solutos, they shall be cast out and left for the forces of the God of the Universe." He looked his small audience over. "Do you understand the meaning of what I have told you?"

Each nodded.

"Please answer verbally," Goddard said. "Do you understand the consequence?"

Each in turn said, "I understand."

Rahab, known as Goddard on Earth, plainly stated, "The new heaven Lucifer has promised is a lie. We do not now and will never rule on Earth or Heaven."

They looked at each other.

"The truth is Lucifer has been defeated as foretold in the cannons revealed through God's Word to mankind."

"How can this be?" Sarah asked. "Since before the creation of time we have been told—"

"It's a lie," Goddard cut her off. "Perpetrated by the Father of Lies. Lucifer is powerless to stop his and our

eventual casting into the Lake of Fire. It will come to pass. The Solutos is not an achievement to be envied. It is a curse. All members share the knowledge that our time is fleeting.”

“How do we stop this?” Ben asked.

“We don’t.”

“Why are you telling us?” William asked.

“Because of what you have achieved.”

“What have we achieved?”

“Eros, philos, agape,” Goddard said. “Think of it. In less than an instant, the capability to love was removed from our very being. That moment our thoughts betrayed us and we followed Lucifer, the true God of the Universe was removed from our presence. We have been without love. Without the ability to love or be loved.”

He spread his calloused and scarred arms. “And within this small group, four of you have experienced an all-consuming, unquenchable love that led you to betray everything to protect those you care for, regardless of the consequence.”

Goddard looked at Ben. “I know you have seen it, Ben. That is the very thing you attempted to use against them in your betrayal. Try to deny it.”

Ben looked at each of them. “I don’t deny I have seen it.”

Goddard backed up and stood before them. “Because of what you have achieved, the Solutos believe that you alone may have the chance to answer a question of the ages. The question no one dares to speak aloud for fear of exile.” Goddard’s bones cracked as he stood tall. “Did that choice we made in less than an instant seal our fate for all eternity?”

They looked at each other.

“Lucifer has given up,” Goddard told them. “He is weak and defeated. The truth is he could never act without asking God for permission. He is no longer concerned with humanity. You carry on a war in his name, but for what purpose? Your commander has already surrendered. What

we need to know, what I need to find out is can we find favor with the one, true God?" His face twisted. "Are we beyond hope?"

Zachary stood. "How do we answer this?"

Goddard shook his head. "I don't know, but I know this. You have found the unfindable. The members of the Solutos will protect you in every way if you agree to keep this secret and continue to search for a way to redemption."

Goddard turned to William. "Remember what I told you when you first came to the house of Gainsboro?"

William responded, "When you embody a human..."

Goddard continued, "You get everything that goes with it. That is what has been told to every soul who enters the world as a Talker since the beginning of creation. We need to know if that's true. There have been two things that have eluded us in all of history. Love, you have achieved. Can you achieve the other? The Solutos live with the knowledge of our fate. Will you help the Solutos, help me, find out just how far God's grace extends?"

William looked at Sarah and stood. "I will help if the others agree."

Sarah stood next to William. "I too will accept this task."

Goddard looked to Bethany and Zachary. "You may pursue all aspects of your life if you agree. I will mask and protect you through your lives if you accept."

Zachary and Bethany stood. Both responded, "I accept the task."

The four of them turned to Ben. "How are we supposed to find redemption?" Ben asked.

Goddard walked to him. "If this was easy, another would have found the answer. If you accept, you have my protection." He held his hand up. "But this must be confidential. None outside of this group and the members of the Solutos can know for what we search."

Ben stood. "I will search for what you ask."

*Inspiration*

Goddard nodded his head. “The Solutos thank you for your service.”

Zachary’s eyes opened, and he lay in his bed thinking of what he’d agreed to. He got up and met Bethany and Ben in the hallway. They looked at each other for a moment then walked down the stairs together. Sarah and William were already in the kitchen.

“We’re all in agreement?” William asked.

The five of them stood together in the town of Inspiration and agreed to work for the Solutos—the highest members in the forces of Lucifer—and search for redemption for the fallen.

END

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